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ABSTRACT

In 1964, when the "living" theatre appeared to be dying in New York, theater in Italy began changing from an author-oriented to a performance-oriented, nonliterary form. The articles in this document trace the historical development of Italian theatre and analyze current dramas which demonstrate the diversity of approaches and the energy and commitment of Italian theatrical art. The topics discussed include the "adriani lazzi" of the "commedia dell'arte," the theatre of the grotesque, contemporary Italian Theatre, the theatre of Meme Perlini, and the post avant-garde theatre movement. The following dramas are analyzed individually: Giuliano Vasilico's "Proust," Group Altro's "ICS," "Ostal" by Cfr. (an Italian experimental group), Spazio Zero's "To Salvatore Giuliano," Ouroboros's "The Death of Geometry," Stran'amore's "City Lights," "La Gaia Scienza," and Il Carrozzone's "Presages of the Vampire." The scenery, acting style, theme, and plot are described for each drama and numerous photographs of actual presentations accompany the articles. The document also includes an interview with Dario Fo, a well-known Italian actor who began acting in the postwar years, and reviews of nine new books on the dramatic arts. (MAI)

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The Drama Review

Thematic Issue:

Italian Theatre

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Italian Theatre Issue

An Introduction

Fourteen years ago, when *The Drama Review* was *Tulane Drama Review*, we devoted an issue (Spring 1964) to Post-War Italian Theatre. It included articles on the Piccolo Teatro, on Ugo Betti, and on Eduardo DeFilippo. The introduction pointed out that "modern Italian theatre still means Pirandello to a great many people. But there are other more recent writers of interest. . . ." Today we hope that modern Italian theatre does not mean Pirandello, Betti, and DeFilippo to many people. Italian theatre has changed rapidly and radically since that earlier issue.

That issue also included an "Epitaph for the Living Theatre" and articles on the closing of its 14th Street theatre. The Living Theatre was not dead, however. It was on its way to Italy, among other places, where it would begin its radical work in changing the theatre from an author-oriented one to a performance-oriented one. Today Italy—due in part, perhaps, to its acceptance of the "Living" and of nonliterary theatre—has one of the leading avant-garde theatres in the world. It is a theatre quite different from the one we discussed in 1964.

The Drama Review has not neglected the growth of this theatre during the last decade. We have published articles on the work of Luca Ronconi (T52, T74), Dario Fo (T55, T66), Mario Ricci (T55, T56), Memè Perlini (T68), and Giuliano Scabia (T73). Now we are attempting to present both a broad view of current experimental theatre in Italy and a close view of particular productions. We cannot be complete, but we hope that we can suggest the diversity of approaches prevalent there and the energy and commitment of this work.

Mario Prosperi, a playwright/critic/teacher who lives in Rome, coedited the issue, and he deserves much of the credit for gathering the material. His article on "Contemporary Italian Theatre" could serve as the real introduction to the issue. Denise Applin, who did editing as well as much of the translation, also deserves our thanks.

M.K.

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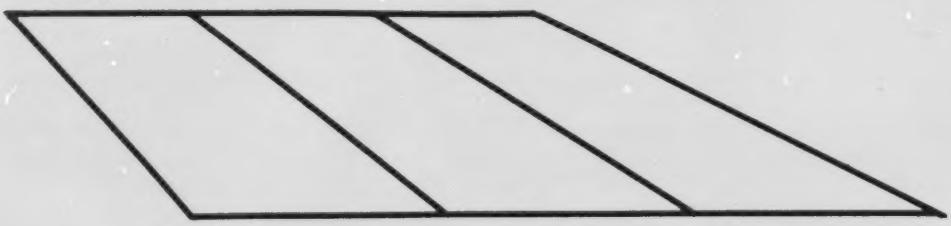
The Adriani Lazzi of the Commedia Dell'Arte

by
Herschel Garfein
and
Mel Gordon

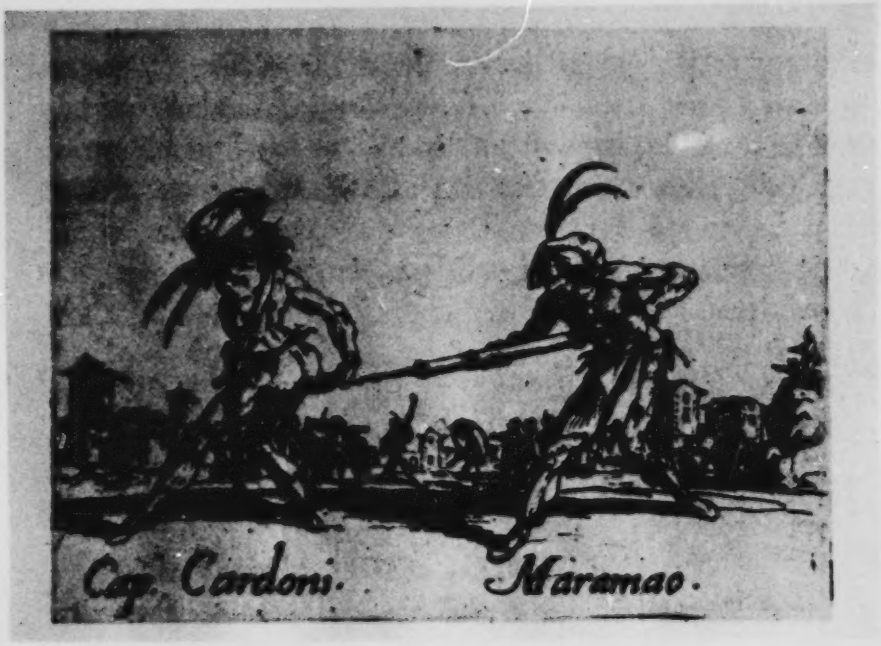
It would be difficult to think of an historical acting style that affected twentieth-century performance more than the Italian sixteenth-century *commedia dell'arte*. For avant-garde directors in the 1910's—people like Meyerhold, Evreinov, Reinhardt, Copeau—the *commedia*, with its reliance on stereotyped characters, masks, broad gestures, and improvised comedy, represented the very theatricality of the theatre. Performing across Europe and elsewhere from 1550 to 1750, often without dramatic texts as such and outside proscenium stages, *commedia* troupes developed large audiences of all classes, another feature that made their work so attractive to avant-garde directors. Even the most popular entertainments of the first part of the twentieth century—silent and sound motion picture comedy as well as radio comedy—seem closely related to the *commedia*. Indeed, it is hard to conjure images of the *commedia* without seeing Charlie Chaplin, W.C. Fields, Bert Lahr, the Marx Brothers, or Laurel and Hardy.



As if in response to this renewed practical interest in *commedia,* scholars in the United States, Russia, France, and Britain began to produce studies of the *commedia* that are among the most finely detailed works on any acting style—books like Winifred Smith's *The Commedia dell'Arte* (New York, 1912), Constant Mic's *The Commedia dell'Arte* (Petrograd, 1914), P.L. Duchartre's *La Comédie italienne* (Paris, 1925), Cyril Beaumont's *History of Harlequin* (London, 1926), Allardyce Nicoll's *Masks, Mimes, and Miracles* (London, 1931), as well as others. So, when the *commedia* again inspired new kinds of theatre in the early sixties, much of the avant-garde theatre practitioners' knowledge of it came from these books in addition to old film comedy.

But if one looks carefully at the rich iconography in those books, he will find drawings, mezzotints, and paintings of perverse sexual play, nudity, vomiting, defecation, and all kinds of activities involving enemas and chamberpots—images of actions that are almost never described in the texts. For instance, even in Duchartre's book, where captions accompany most of the pictures, a drawing of the Doctor administrating an enema to Arlecchino's (or Harlequin's) exposed buttocks is described as an "injection" with a "syringe." Many of the books completely ignore the visual documentation printed in them. In fact, the *commedia's* celebrated *lazzi,* or comic bits, are rarely discussed in more than a couple of paragraphs. Even the few examples cited relate not to the *commedia* seen in the streets and marketplaces throughout Europe but to the *Comédie Italienne* in Paris, where the *commedia* was subject to a constant and vigorous censorship. It is as if these scholars publishing in the teens, twenties, and even later were psychologically or morally inhibited from accurately documenting the *commedia's* best-known performance mode, its *lazzi.*

Most histories of the *commedia* record the derivation and the possible meanings of the word *lazzi*. Clearly, the word had a multiplicity of meanings even for the *commedia* performers themselves. Generally, the *lazzi* can refer to comic routines that were planned or unplanned and that could be performed in any one of dozens of plays. Some were obviously used whenever a scene seemed to drag on too long and were totally improvised by one actor. Others, involving stage properties and several actors, had to be intricately preplanned. Some *lazzi* could be instigated by a single actor, forcing his unsuspecting partners to improvise around him. In any case, the function of the *lazzi* was to "bring down the house." Another definition of *lazzi* could be various



stock, but unexpected, activities that guaranteed laughs for the actors. Very often, spectators came to a *commedia* performance only to see one actor's special *lazzo* and how it might be worked into the show.

An example of a *lazzo* being both improvised and contrived can be seen in the "*Lazzo* of nightfall." If, in the middle of a performance, the *commedia* manager notices

that the audience, which frequently did not understand Italian, is not responding well, he, in the character of Arlecchino, may start a monolog like "Time flies at the pace of a snail on the floodwater current that has just stopped. Why Midnight, you hourglass moon!. . . ." This would cue his actors to begin setting up for the "*Lazzo* of nightfall," where all the actors suddenly pretend darkness has descended over them, causing them to grope around the stage, fall off ladders, bump into objects, discover what seem to be bloody corpses, put their hands down dresses and breeches while mistaking them for other things, etc. Exactly the same *lazzo* with its fixed or semi-fixed routines could, of course, be decided on before the performance began.

Although several thousand performers enacted *commedia* during its heyday, no detailed lists of *lazzi* are extant. The only exception is in a manuscript deposited at the library of Perugia. Most of what is known of *lazzi* is from short performance descriptions, actors' writings on the theatre or their lives, notations of *lazzi* sequence—sometimes no more than titles—in *commedia* plot outlines or scenarios that were posted on the wings of the stage or appeared in the *commedia* texts that

were intended for publication. Why the *lazzi* were never made publicly available can be explained in several ways. While *commedia* troupes could not patent their routines, they were not anxious for their best work to be copied by competitors or even read by a theatregoing public. If much of the *commedia* was obscene, judging from the visual and fragmented written evidence, then writing down the explicit details could only jeopardize the troupes, who, like many itinerant performers, were sometimes only a step or so ahead of the legal authorities. Finally, it is possible that it never occurred to many *commedia* troupes to write out and preserve the *lazzi*, there being no real need for it.

The following is a translation of a list of *lazzi* from *Selva overo zibaldone di concetti comici raccolti dal P.D. Placido* by Adriani di Lucca. Although Adriani himself writes of several unusual *lazzi*--sometimes deploring their use--only those *lazzi* that appeared in a single list in manuscripts that were deposited at the library of Perugia have been included. The *lazzi* probably constitute the entire comic repertory of a small Italian *commedia* troupe that was active in the early 1700's. Exactly why it was not made available before by *commedia* scholars, who were certainly aware of its existence, remains a mystery.

PULCINELLA
Seventeenth century
Engraving by de Gojn

1) Lazzo of precipitating: *Pulcinella or Coviello is asked to perform a favor and is shown money. He takes the money, saying, "You want me to precipitate!" [instead of 'participate'].*
2) Lazzo of the pellegrina (a special, short cloak worn by travelers): *The lovers, supplicating Coviello, fall to their knees, and Coviello, bending to speak to one, sticks his ass in the other's face.*
3) Lazzo of the fresh/cool urine: *Pulcinella proclaims that all urine is warm. The servant-girl replies that cool (*fresca*) urine is that which has just been made and is still fresh (*fresca*). Pulcinella is convinced.*
4) Lazzo of crying and laughing: *The old man and his son have each tricked the other. The old man is crying over the departure of his son, at the same time, he is laughing in anticipation of sleeping with his son's mistress. Thinking of the reverse, the son is also laughing and crying.*
5) Lazzo of good breeding: *Pulcinella asks his wife if any man has greeted her on the street. Good breeding, she replies, demands that she return the compliment, then she must open the door, invite him in and have him sit down. Pulcinella cries out, "Your good breeding has made me a cuckold!"*
6) Lazzo of fruits and kisses: *Hidden, Coviello imitates the voice of Pulcinella's beloved. When Pulcinella demands "the fruits of love," Coviello bashes him on the head. Pulcinella complains that kisses are "the fruits of love," not punches. But Coviello continues to slap him.*
7) Lazzi of bamboozling: *Coviello, offering Pulcinella the secrets of amorous speech, teaches him a thousand ridiculous sayings. Then, with Coviello egging him on, Pulcinella repeats them to his beloved.*
8) Lazzi of sewing and sticking: *While Coviello and Pulcinella are talking, Pulcinella seems to move away. Coviello calls him back, saying, "Sew yourself to me [meaning, stay close to me]!" Pulcinella picks up and a needle and thread. Coviello explains himself, "Attach yourself to me!" Pulcinella pulls out a huge rope. Coviello warns Pulcinella that he had better take down his words. [That is, take them seriously.] Then, as Coviello continues to talk, Pulcinella begins to grab his words from the air and put them in a cup. When he finishes speaking, Coviello asks if Pulcinella has indeed taken down his words. Pulcinella, to prove that he has, uncovers the cup, but finds nothing.*
9) Lazzo of the goodness of Pulcinella: *Pulcinella, overhearing the Capitano or others plotting his murder, enters in disguise and praises himself, saying, "Pulcinella is a witty, straightforward, and good man."*
10) Lazzo of the fly: *Pulcinella has been left to guard his master's house. His master returns and asks if there is anyone in the house. "Not a fly!" attests Pulcinella. But his master enters only to find hordes of people in his house. He scolds Pulcinella, who replies, "Well, you didn't find a fly, only people."*
11) Lazzo of pulse, urine, and prescription: *Pulcinella feels his ankle and announces, "It's a headache!" Then he has urine brought to him, which he drinks and spits out. Then, to write a prescription, he has Coviello crouch on his hands and knees with his ass toward the audience. In this position, Coviello must hold a squid in his anus, which Pulcinella uses as an inkwell, saying, "Galen, I thank you,* ego medicus."
12) Lazzo of shut-up: *Pulcinella interrupts his master's discourse, and three times his master tells him "Shut up!" Later, the master calls Pulcinella, who shouts back to him "Shut up" three times.*
13) Lazzi of water: *The mistress has fainted and the servant-girl cries for water. Pulcinella brings her all kinds of water: rosewater, jasmine water, orange water, mint water, lily water. Finally, he pisses in a cup and splashes it on his mistress. This revives her, and he sings the praises of "the water distilled by our rod."*
14) Lazzo of the dispute: *Pulcinella tells his master that, having been asked if he wanted to dispute the charges against him, he answered, "Nolis." His master tells him that he should have said, "Volo." Defending himself, Pulcinella says, "How could I fly (*volare*) without wings? Pietro told me . . . " "What person is that?" interrupts the*

master, and Pulcinella replies, "Pietro is first person plural." The master calls Pulcinella a fool since he should have said, "Pietro is third person singular." "But," Pulcinella explains, "when Corporal Pietro went with the guards to Naples, he walked ahead of them. Ergo, *Pietro was the first person, but with the guards he was plural!"*

15) Lazzo of paying: *The creditor finds Pulcinella and demands payment. Pulcinella says that he will pay the creditor before the spit dries on the ground. The creditor is content until Pulcinella explains he will now find a consumptive to keep the ground wet with his saliva, and off he goes.*
16) Lazzo of "Your Honor!": *The master calls Coviello, who responds, "Your Honor!" The master tells him to make ready the crystal carriage with the emerald horses and to prepare a lunch of parrot tongues and roast phoenix. Pulcinella marvels at this and asks Coviello what it means. Coviello describes his master's richness at great length. Then he says that because it is a day of charity, the emerald horses cannot wear their bronze coats since the poor people would rip them from their backs, and so on, with one excuse after another, explaining why none of his master's riches can be seen by Pulcinella.*
17) Lazzo of the horses: *Having delivered a horse, the creditor demands payment from Coviello. Coviello tells the creditor that he is not going to pay and that he is returning the horse. The creditor shouts that he doesn't want the horse back. Pulcinella tells the creditor that since he doesn't want the horse back why doesn't he just take the gold.*
18) Lazzo of the six hundred ducats: *Pulcinella tells Coviello that he no longer wants to marry Orazio, but now Cinzio. Coviello says that Cinzio owes his master six hundred ducats, and as soon as she is married, he will come to collect. Pulcinella decides to marry Orazio.*
19) Lazzo of Pulcinella's birth: *Pulcinella explains to Coviello that he was born before his father. When Coviello says that this is impossible, Pulcinella replies that while his father was walking in Toledo, he fell and barely missed being run over by a carriage. A passerby screamed at him, "You must have been born yesterday!" Since this happened a year ago, Pulcinella must have been born before his father.*
20) Lazzo of the shoe: *The guards have come to arrest Pulcinella. He says that first he must tie his shoe, and bending down, he grabs one of the ankles of each of the two guards, trips them up, and runs off.*
21) Lazzo of "Why don't you!": *Someone in a group of men is asked to do something difficult, like capture a robber hiding in the dark. The person asked continually replies, "Why don't you!"*
22) Lazzo of the list: *The German innkeeper reads from his shopping list. Everything is mispronounced. So, "four chickens" becomes "four broken pillars," etc.*
23) Lazzo of knocking: *The master tells Pulcinella to knock on the door. Pulcinella asks what it has done wrong that it must be hit. The master demands that he knock (*bussare*). Pulcinella says that he doesn't want to make a fool of himself (*abbuffare*). "Knock lightly," says the master. Pulcinella barely touches the door. "Now knock softly (or 'low')." Pulcinella bends down. "Knock loudly (or 'high')!" He stands up. "Louder!" Pulcinella tries to climb the door. This is repeated with "calling."*
24) Lazzo of the tempest survived: *Coviello describes a story of a ship in a tempest and how he was saved from it. Pulcinella does the same, but in a ridiculous way. Finally seeing that he is not believed, he explains that in the middle of the storm he went ashore, entered a city, found the marketplace. There he bought two bladders, which he affixed to his arms before returning to the sea. These kept him afloat and thus he saved himself.*
25) Lazzo of the boy in the tempest: *Coviello meets the father of a boy who was in a shipwreck. Coviello explains, "The tempest came and the boy went under." "He drowned?" asks the father. Coviello says yes and continues, "First a wave, then a tornado hit the boat." The father: "So, he drowned?" Coviello says no. Thus, keeping him in suspense, Coviello continues the story, then concludes that the boy was saved.*
26) Lazzo of the O: *Coviello asks Pulcinella for the name of his beloved. Pulcinella tells him it begins with an "O," and that he should guess it. Coviello begins, "Orsola, Olimpia, Orcana." Then Pulcinella says that she is named Rosetta. Coviello complains that her name begins with an "R," not an "O." Pulcinella replies, "I always like to start from the 'O,' how about you?"*

27) Lazzo of the doves: *Pulcinella tells his master that he went up to the doves' cages, freed the doves, and told them to go directly to the master. Now, if they haven't come, it's their fault, not Pulcinella's.*
28) Lazzo of the pigs: *Pulcinella explains that to avoid paying a tax, he hid a pig in his carriage. When he arrived at the city gate, the tax collectors asked what was in the carriage. Pulcinella replied, "That pig of my master," and so they let him go on. But the pig cried, "Ru, ru," and the tax collectors found it. Pulcinella maintains that the fault was with the pig, who wouldn't be quiet.*
29) Lazzo of the master: *When Coviello or the servant-girl gets caned by his master, Pulcinella throws off, "If that were my master, I'd give him a punch, then hit him with a shovel."*

SCENE FROM THE COMMEDIA DELL'ARTE ABOUT 1577
From the "Recueil Fossard"

30) Lazzo of the third: *The lovers have quarrelled. They call Pulcinella. The man says to Pulcinella, "Tell her she's an ingrate!" Pulcinella goes to the woman, "He says that he'll grate you!" She replies, "Tell him he's a tyrant (*tiranno*)!" Pulcinella returns to the man and says, "She hopes that you get the plague (*il malanno*)!" He replies, "Tell her she's a barbarian (*barbara*)!" Pulcinella relays, "He says you should shave (ve facci la barba)!" The woman tells Pulcinella, "He's disloyal (disleale) and he betrayed me (mi ha tradita)!" Pulcinella returns to the man, "She said, 'Make a serving dish (serveale) of boiled water (acqua bollita).' " The man replies, "She is a temperamental tyrant (tiranna stizzosa)!" Pulcinella tells the woman that for one year the man has found her hairy (tiene pelosa)."*

31) Lazzo of the smoked codfish: *Pulcinella says, "The master is always saying, "Go here, go there (va cca, va lla)!' Very well, I've made a dried smoked codfish (baccala)!" [NOTE: Here, as elsewhere, Pulcinella speaks in a Neapolitan dialect.]*

32) Lazzo of the three hunters: *Pulcinella tells this story: There were three hunters—one without arms, one without eyes, and one without legs. The one without arms said, "I'll carry the shotgun"; the one without eyes said, "I'll shoot the hare as soon as I see it"; the third, without legs, said, "I'll run to retrieve it!" They went hunting. The one without hands pointed, "There's the hare!" The one without eyes shot it, and the one without legs ran to recover it. Then, wanting to cook the hare, the three went to a house without a floor witnout a door or windows, and without a roof. The one without arms knocked on the door, and the man who wasn't at home came out and asked them what they wanted. They replied that they needed a cauldron of water. The man who wasn't home brought a cauldron that had no bottom, filled with water, when suddenly, who should show up but one who wasn't there, who had no eyes, no arms, and no legs, and he took off with the hare.*

33) Lazzo of begging: *Someone pretends to be a beggar. First he begs from passersby with his right hand, as if he were one-armed. Then with the left hand. Later, he pretends to be a Spanish beggar, then a German one, and then a French beggar.*

34, 35, 36) Latin lazzi: *The doctor, or the pedant, makes a number of statements in Latin that the Neapolitan Pulcinella misunderstands. For example, the Vergil line, "The queen for some time had been pressed by love," becomes in Pulcinella's head, "The queen, being pregnant, twice ate raw sausage." Or, Virgil's "The ship cast anchor by the curved shore" is interpreted as "The anchor broke the bottom of the boat and sent a letter with a crow." Or Pulcinella thinks that* rumpe moras *("break off"; "end delay") means "Your ass hurts."*

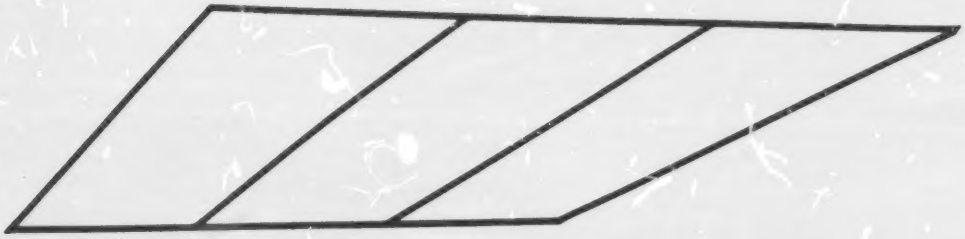
37) Lazzo of "Anca Nicola": *Wandering through the world, Pulcinella teaches women the song "Anca Nicola," during which they must raise their skirts three times. When they ask him what the use of this is, he replies that seeing the gate open, men will enter it. Subject of the play* Basalisco.

38) Lazzo of the dowry of Pulcinella's wife: *A windmill in the back of the house; a watermill in the front of the house, a forest beneath the house (refers to her lower anatomy).*

39) Lazzo of the school of humanity: *Pulcinella announces that his wife or sister runs a school of humanity at his home. That is, she is a prostitute.*

List translated by Herschel Garfein and Mel Gordon (with special assistance by Gennaro Turci)

Herschel Garfein *is studying musicology at Yale University.*



The Theatre of the Grotesque

by Giovanni Calendoli

In the years after the first World War, two plays unexpectedly achieved a clamorous success in the major capitals of Europe. This phenomenon demonstrated that an important new phase of Italian theatre was replacing the almost exclusive domination of D'Annunzio in the years past. The two plays were: *Six Characters in Search of an Author* by Luigi Pirandello, staged in Paris in 1923, and *The Mask and the Face* by Luigi Chiarelli, staged in London in 1924.

The triumphant reception given by the Parisian spectators to *Six Characters* was the beginning of Pirandello's international success, and it initiated the prodigious dissemination of his work. The London production of *The Mask and the Face*, on the other hand, was the end of a flowering of plays that had taken place during the war and had been given the rather incorrect name of the Theatre of the Grotesque. Some of the plays thus categorized are: *Altalena (Seesaw*, 1910) by Alessandro Varaldo, *La campana d'argento* (*The Silver Bell*, 1913) and *L'uccello del paradiso* (*The Bird of Paradise*, 1919) by Enrico Cavacchioli, *La scala di seta* (*The Silk Staircase*, 1917) and *Le lacrime e le stelle* (*The Tears and the Stars*, 1918) by Luigi Chiarelli, *L'uomo che incontrò se stesso* (*The Man Who Encountered Himself*, 1918) by Luigi Antonelli, *La morte in vacanza* (*Death Takes a Holiday*. 1923) by Alberto Casella, and *Marionette, che passione!* (*Marionettes, What Passion!*, 1918) by Rosso di San Secondo. In an essay written in 1920, though repudiated soon after, Silvio D'Amico included Luigi Pirandello among the Grotesque authors for *Pensaci, Giacomino!* (*Think of It, Giacomino!*) *Il giuoco delle parti* (*The Rules of the Game*), and *Il piacere dell'onesta* (*The Pleasure of Honesty*).

Not one of these authors, however, manifested in any way the intention of either proliferating or taking part in a programmatically defined theatrical movement. They all denied, more or less explicitly, their involvement in it. The category was almost exclusively a creation of the critics or, more specifically, of the theatrical chronicles of the time. It was subsequently accepted by historians without any rigorous verification.

Only Silvio D'Amico made any effort to explain coherently a formula for the Theatre of the Grotesque. According to him, it was a theatre in which the characters were, in reality, marionettes and puppets animated by means of a complicated system of strings. They were not human beings capable of acting independently. Ultimately, though, he renounced even this definition because too many of the plays would have been excluded by it. Even the characters whom Rosso di San Secondo classified as "marionettes" in the title of his best known play were, rather, tragically autonomous individuals torn to pieces by an exasperated consciousness.

D'Amico's interpretation finds its justification outside the Theatre of the Grotesque and in the literature of the age. One often finds, in early twentieth-century literature, characters who are obsessed by the agony of losing any sense of self-determination and becoming as marionettes guided by blind destiny. The insoluble dialectic that went on between the concepts of free will and conditioning brought forth in Italy one of the most salient themes of the epoch--conditioning reforms and imprisons the essentially free nature of the individual. The character, who usually varies substantially from author to author, undergoes a process of gradual paralysis and shrinkage; he eventually assumes the deformed movements of a marionette. Massimo Bontempelli developed this theme with subtle, poetic intelligence in his unfortunately disregarded drama *Siepe a nordovest* (*The Hedge at the Northwest*, 1923). In it, a world of humans and a world of puppets are superimposed; the puppets, tragically conditioned by the presence of the human beings, think that they are the possessors of free-will.

The Italian Theatre of the Grotesque cannot be considered as a movement, and even less as a school characterized by its own poetics. Plays such as *The Mask and the Face* or *The Bird of Paradise* or *The Man Who Encountered Himself*--texts generally considered emblematic of the Grotesque--have few elements in common. Those that do exist are not sufficient to constitute a genre; a category or even a group of works identifiable for an essential affinity. Even the scepticism, which reflects the climate of the times and is present in these three examples, is colored in each with a clearly different "tonality." The theatrical structure as well as the construction of the characters are different in each play. In *The Mask and the Face*, the "polemic force" dominates; it is personified by characters of naturalistic disposition. *The Man Who Encountered Himself*, on the other hand, is animated by an overtly unreal game: a man meets himself as a youth. *The Bird of Paradise* develops in an exacerbated atmosphere where the clashes among the characters assume a symbolic value.

The title and the formula for the Grotesque acquire a validity and persuasive force only if they are viewed in conjunction with the critical phase that accompanies every stage of Italian theatre. The term is completely emptied of its traditional semantic content and it assumes a contingent significance: the Theatre of the Grotesque is the theatre that is able to break all ties with the traditional theatre--the theatre that, on the level of scenic experimentation, is able to deny character and to revoke tradition.

All the characters of the new dramatic literature were painfully sincere and at the same time pretenders; they were both humans and puppets who analyzed, judged and pronounced punishment on themselves with a sort of cruel delight. It is easy to understand the problems of staging that one might have with theatrical works pervaded by these elements. They were definitely not well adapted to the Italian actors of the time, who were incapable of identifying with their feelings. The Italian actors came from a tradition that, in the nineteenth century, was strong in three fundamental

Drawing of actors and marionettes from Bontempelli's *Siepe a nordovest* by Giorgio De Chirico

directions: loud declamation (that fueled the tragedies of Vittorio Alfieri), naturalism or positivism (the last of its great exponents was Ermete Zacconi), and the comic or farcical. The ironic use of mime never found a following in Italy as it had in France and England.

After the production of Chiarelli's *The Mask and the Face*, a malicious voice was raised in theatrical circles. It was rumored that the author had intended his play to be a tragic drama and that Virgilio Talli, because of a simple misunderstanding, had staged it as a comedy, unwittingly infusing it with a "grotesquerie" that did not exist in the text. The rumor had no basis in truth; one could easily deduce the intention of the author from the unequivocal structure of the action. But the fact that it was invented in the first place is extraordinarily significant. It demonstrates how difficult the relationship between actors and authors actually was. The new authors were oriented toward developing a new language, while the actors were more concerned with carrying on the traditional conventions.

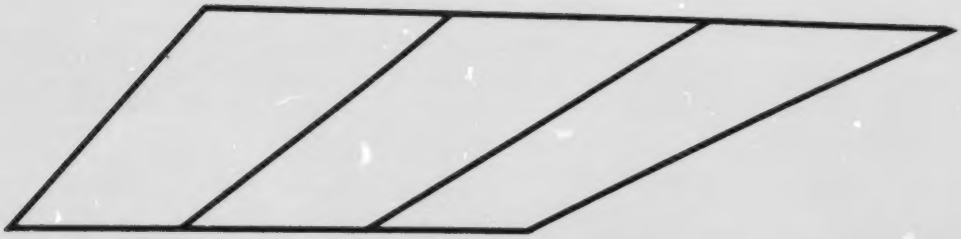
The authors sensed the impossibility of recognizing themselves in a style of acting and representation that betrayed them. The actors were at odds with the dramaturgic material that they could not really perform because it demanded a completely new approach.

Such lack of sympathy, with its pernicious scenic consequences, explained the repeated failures—beginning with the Italian production of *Six Characters*—better than the supposed unpreparedness of the spectators. The "capocomico" (the director; literally, "actor-manager") in Pirandello's play might have been Virgilio Talli himself. Talli brought to the stage dramas by Varaldo, Bontempelli, Chiarelli, Antonelli, Pirandello, and others. His work was rather pathetic, though; he read the texts of young

authors and sensed their innovative significance, then handed them over to his actors who "recited" them in the traditional manner. His failures were numerous. The amount of money he squandered on these bold and risky experiments was recouped by staging dramas in the style of Henry Bernstein and Henry Bataille, which could always be counted on to fill the theatre.

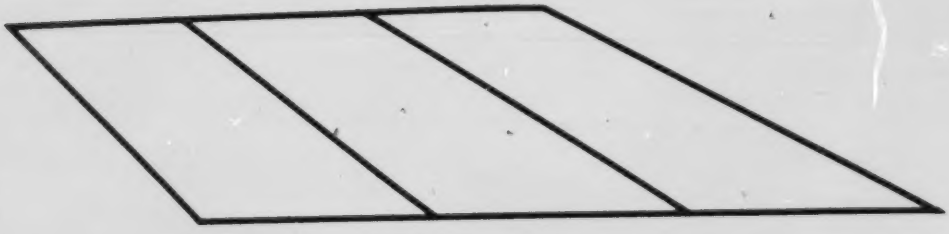
The catastrophic reception of *Six Characters* in Rome in 1921, followed by the success in Paris two years later of Georges Pitoeff's production of the same play, taught Pirandello a lesson, and he decided to become the *"capocomico"* of his own plays. Not a few of the authors, from Chiarelli to Antonelli, realized the importance of this move and became artistic directors of new companies, in the tradition of their predecessor, Carlo Goldoni. As "impromptu" directors, the authors effectively contributed to the revitalizing of the Italian stage, which now opened its doors to more advanced European styles.

Translated by Denise Applin



Contemporary Italian Theatre

by Mario Prosperi



What is particularly Italian about the theatre that is produced in Italy? What characteristics make it different—recognizable—to the foreign spectator?

After the war, Italian theatre was scarcely significant for its innovations. An effort to restore tradition in theatre absorbed most creative energies. Three outstanding influences belong to this period. The first is that of the Academy of Dramatic Arts, founded in 1936 by Silvio D'Amico with the purpose of raising the cultural level of Italian theatre. The Academy concentrated on the critical analysis of texts. Orazio Costa and his students, Luigi Squarzina and Vittorio Gassman, were the main exponents of this concern for tradition. The institution was a profound influence on the generation of postwar actors.

The second influence was that of foreign theatre. After the war, there was a consumer attitude toward French, English and American "hit shows." Luchino Visconti introduced Italian audiences to Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller through outstanding productions of their plays, characterized by a scrupulous use of naturalistic staging.

Lastly, the Piccolo Teatro of Milan, directed by Paolo Grassi and Giorgio Strehler, was created as the first state theatre in Italy. In addition to a concern for Italian tradition (albeit critically interpreted within Marxist parameters), the Piccolo Teatro was oriented from the beginning toward a massive importation/translation of the theatre of Bertolt Brecht. The concept of the model theatre in Milan spread, and, soon after, almost every city in Italy had its own state theatre. These institutions were based on the concept of theatre as "public service"; they invariably emphasized political commitment and "epic" poetics. They can be compared to the German Volksbühne of the Weimar Republic, or to the more recent example of the Berliner Ensemble.

Italian playwrights—Ugo Betti and Diego Fabbri, for example—continued in the tradition of Pirandello, though with a narrower scope, producing a sort of realistic morality play based on Catholic thematics. Eduardo De Fillipo benefitted differently from Piranidello's influence. Within the context of the traditional Neapolitan comedy, De Fillipo created a substantially original version of the "moral comedy," providing, with his own staging and performing, a consistent model of theatrical style.

This, very cursorily, is the background against which the innovations in contemporary Italian theatre are to be seen. During the fifties, there was little concern for the avant-garde in Italy. The French Absurdist period, beginning in 1951 with Ionesco's *La Cantatrice Chauve* and in 1952 with Beckett's *En Attendant Godot*, was widely ignored. So was Artaud. French existentialist theatre was treated with diffidence by both the academic and leftist theatre.

The eventual discovery of Ionesco, Beckett and Genet had a definite impact on the cultural policies of the political parties, which were based on programmatic optimism and persuasive rationality. The shock was revitalizing for Italian theatre, which had been setting itself imaginary goals of social redemption and simultaneously choking within the narrow limits of scholasticism and bourgeois entertainment. Absurdism, considered by many to be an insult to "positive values," allowed for a release of energy and an incitement of the imagination to free itself from "correct" intentions. Expressing the irrational, chaotic and grotesque undermined the official belief in the rationality of human progress.

However, a salient characteristic of the new theatre in Italy is that, unlike the French avant-garde of the fifties, it did not originate in playwriting, even where writers were exponents of the movement, but directly in the mise-en-scène. In the Italian

theatre, directors who were most influenced by the Absurd movement (Trionfo, Bene, etc.) did not solicit new plays, nor did they necessarily concentrate on staging plays by the French Absurdists. Rather, they worked directly on the traditional repertoire, attacking key works by means of parody. They interpreted these works on a metalinguistic level, the performance being reduced to an essay, a demystification, an analysis and commentary *about* the original play and its sociological and political implications. Later, the ideas of Michel Foucault reinforced the neo-structuralist grounds for a metalinguistic operation, particularly in the work of Luca Ronconi.

The use of parody was not only a first step in the direction of stylistic change, but an attack on the mythical content of the plays themselves. *Hamlet, Camille, Salomé, Pinocchio, Peer Gynt, Romeo and Juliet, Faust, The Daughter of Iorio*—as well as many other classical and popular myths—underwent a process of disintegration and contamination by impertinent elements. The operation was intended to be the sarcastic antidote to bourgeois education, and the authors claimed that it was much more

Luca Ronconi's *Le Baccanti*

"political" than the Brechtian fables propounded by the institutional theatre. They dismantled the play, then examined its pieces with the estranged, critical eye of the sociologist, pointing out the implications of language and behavior, unmasking the class structure underlying a given morality, and expressing—most unscientifically—a value judgment against the object of unmasking. These parodies themselves eventually became "fables," getting at the "real" aspect of the work. The interpreter went beyond a faithful or sympathetic reading and treated the work as "an alienated object, a source of criticism" according to Brecht's definition.

The most distinctive element in the new Italian theatre, however, is its tendency toward the baroque. Unlike the Brechtian strategy of dialectic rationality and unlike Absurdist allusions to the metaphysical, this kind of Italian theatre is an attack on the *taste* that has supported bourgeois tradition. This challenge is not rational but cerebrally sensual. It treats the object of parody with intentional malice; it aims at reviling the mentality intrinsic or implied in the acceptance of a given concept (liberty or neoclassicism, for example). This "reviling strategy" is often carried out by joining a "noble" quotation to contemporary subculture debris in order to elicit an effect of derisory kitsch. A stately parade might be accompanied by pop music or historical costumes used in conjunction with vulgar acting (farting, spitting, cursing, etc.). Italian mastery in the tradition of the "grotesque" makes the ridiculous appear to be an exquisite narcissistic ritual in which one massacres one's own tendency toward the commonplace and deviance is absorbed in an ambiguously sumptuous style.

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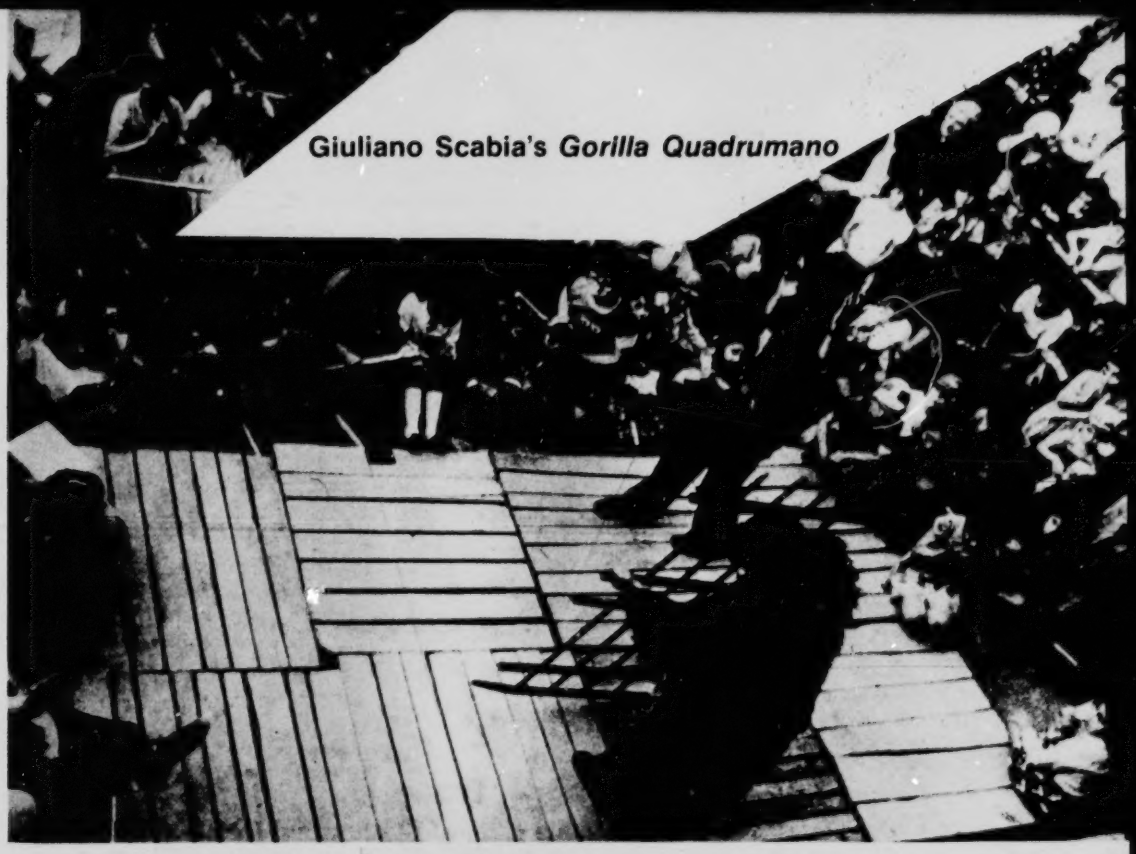
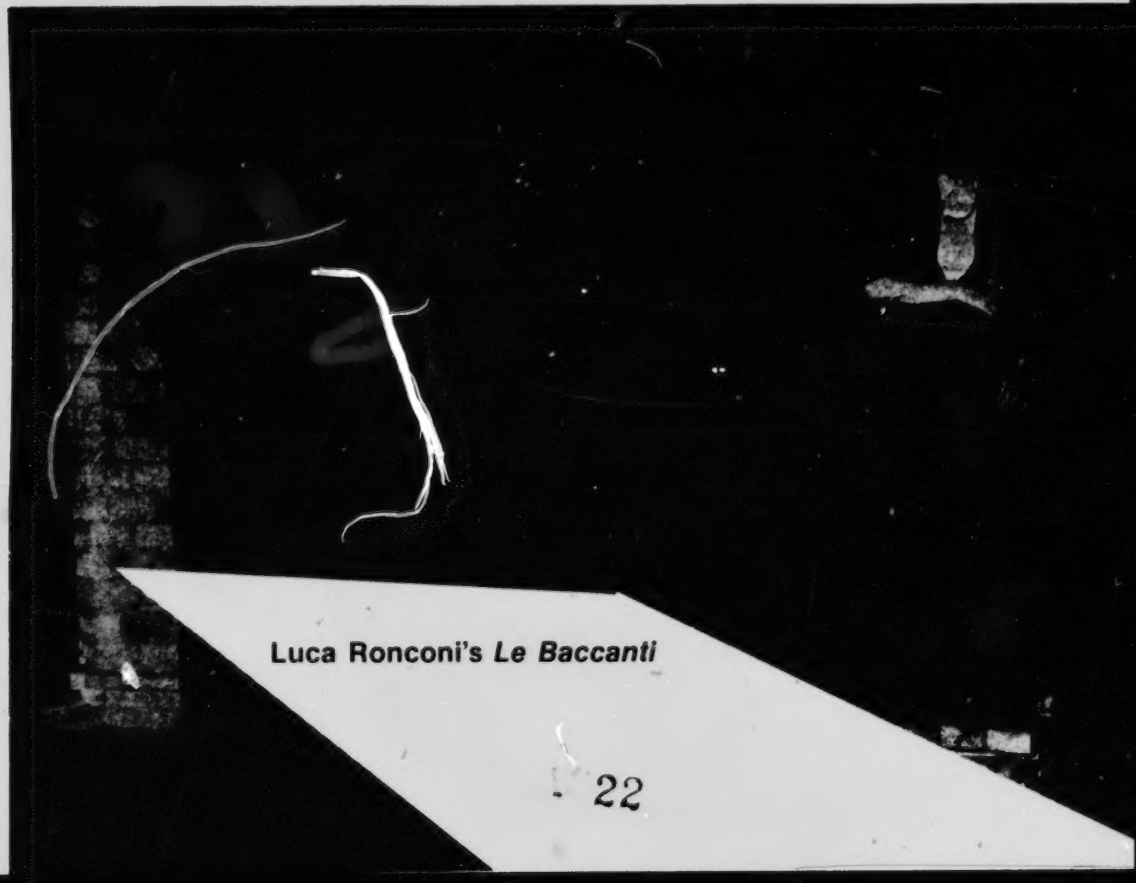
In 1957, Aldo Trionfo started a small cabaret/theatre in Genoa called La Borsa di Arlecchino (Harlequin's Purse). Its first presentation was Ionesco's *The Lesson*. Performances there were divided into a first part, usually something from the literary theatre (Ionesco, Beckett, Genet, Ghelderode, etc.), and a second part that used a cabaret format for songs, sketches and poems. A fusion of the two genres, which eventually came to define Trionfo's style, was tried in some of the productions: the Italian premieres of Genet's *Deathwatch*, Ghelderode's *Escurial*, Beckett's *Endgame* and Kenan's *The Lion*.

In staging these works, Trionfo manifested a tendency toward "pastiche," which Enrico Groppali defines as "an ambiguous, subtle medley of different genres addressed to the intelligent capability of the audience to be a sarcastic accomplice, a mocking voyeur." Music invaded the action with a critical function; it was no longer used as mere psychological comment. Mime was also released from interpretive service. Provocative gags, the use of transvestites and striptease resulted in a kind of burlesque in which materials of diverse origins were used to arrange a consistent speech by their contrast and juxtaposition. In the new dramaturgy, Trionfo found crime, deviance and "burlesque" in the text itself. Later, he applied this procedure to certain literary classics *(Camille, Sandokan)* by imposing his style from outside the text.



Giuliano Scabia's *Gorilla Quadrumano*



Luca Ronconi's *Le Baccanti*

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Carmelo Bene began his theatrical experience at the Teatro delle Arti in Rome in 1960 as Caligula in the play by Camus. Although the play had a classic tone, Bene took on the role with fanatic identification, intent upon "personal exposure." Like the protagonist in a psychodrama, he absorbed and transcended the written drama, refusing to follow the development of the play toward "purging the passion" of the character. Rather, he assumed the role to be his own and, by so doing, overtly challenged the spectators on whom he conferred the role of hostile chorus. He seemed to take a barbaric pleasure in performing the deviant acts of the insane emperor.

After *Caligula*, Bene centered his career in a gallery of infant, adolescent or insane tyrants. The child's frustrated feeling of omnipotence and his manifestation of deviant behavior was the formula for a series of characterizations including *Pinocchio*, *Ubu Roi*, Herod in *Salomé*, *Hamlet* and Marlowe's *Edward II*. Bene's main interpretive instrument was the alienated use of the voice--one person's voice coming out of another's mouth.

Bene's method of burlesque was less intellectual and more existential than Trionfo's Although he subjected his character/self to sarcasm and self-defamation, he never reified himself in characterization. Not unlike Grotowski or Beck, Bene wanted to be the subject, emphasizing the "living" and "present" theatrical act. But very much unlike the severe expressionism of Grotowski or the existential seriousness of the Living Theatre, Carmelo Bene did not create new ceremonies in alternative settings, but arranged the setting according to a desecrated image of the original play. He performed a parody. His use of music was alogical and nonpsychological. It went beyond the subtle allusiveness of Trionfo toward total exaggeration. His soundtracks reached the chaotic frenzy of Dadaist collage; accordingly, the action in the play was often crude and foul. Bene has been accused by fellow actors of extreme violence on stage. Kicking and slapping, for example, are never fake.

Bene produced several of his own plays and, among them, *Nostra Signora dei Turchi* (*Our Lady of the Turks*, 1966) is particularly significant. With this play, the theatre Beat opened. It became a point of reference for successive experimental theatre in Rome. *Our Lady of the Turks* was a Dadaist autobiography, both tragic and self-derisory, in which Bene played a gamut of roles from a depraved friar to an impotent knight.

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A wider movement, which began in the early sixties, introduced avant-garde ideas into an Italian culture that had remained indifferent to innovation since the last Futurist season in the twenties. Group '63, founded by the poets Sanguineti, Pagliarani, Giuliani, Balestrini, Porta and others, was led by writers, but, according to a program of interdisciplinary work, solicited the participation of painters, musicians and theatre people as well. John Cage exerted a direct influence on Group '63, as did Marcel Duchamp.

Group '63 sought to start a "revolution" *within* the language by attacking the *form* of the culture. Their work was, at the time, compared to terrorism; it was, in fact, a sort of "cultural terrorism" intent upon the obliteration of art as the "mirror" of predeter-

mined content or as the "echo" of individual psychic torment. The "reduction of the ego" was a primary objective for the group. It was achieved by a systematic regression that enabled the artist to put himself in touch with the objects beyond the morbid barrier of the existential ego. Umberto Eco, who was in the forefront of the movement, theorized the "open work" as the product of a "wild reduction of the ego, a schizophrenic experience and ready appropriation of the most varied materials, all joined to the self-consciousness of the work that is being done."

At the first general meeting of the group in Palermo in 1963, some experiments were conducted by Luigi Gozzi and Ken Dewey, an American director with experience in Happenings. They joined with another group, ACT, which included the actress Carmen Scarpitta. The set design was by Achille Perilli. Several short theatre pieces written by poets of the group (Sanguineti, Giuliani, Pagliarani, etc.) were staged using environmental techniques. The Living Theatre was in Italy at the time and had significant contact with the group. This may be considered to have had some bearing on their own development from *The Brig* to *Mysteries and Smaller Pieces*.

The seed, however, failed to produce similar fruit in the Italian theatre. The issues with which Group '63 was involved were, in fact, more formalistic and mundane than those of the Living Theatre. They were concerned with neither communitarian utopianism nor mysticism. The Italian avant-garde was essentially materialistic. Group '63 disbanded in 1967.

Memè Perlini

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Carlo Quartucci had worked with disciples from the University of Rome on texts by Beckett. He also participated in a meeting of Group '63 in 1965 and henceforth became involved in their movement. He applied the principle of "reduction of the ego" by means of an impersonal, mechanized pantomime.

He collaborated with Giuliano Scabia, one of the poets from Group '63, in the staging of Scabia's play, *Zip*, in Venice in the fall of 1965. In *Zip*, Quartucci made use of the entire space, expunging the division between the stage and the house. This was done in accordance with the resolution to dissolve the single perspective (the spectator's *ego*) and to multiply the focuses of the performance. The spectator was immersed in the performing area; the action was spread out in every direction around him. The principle of the "open work" was also applied: the *form* of the play was in the construction and destruction of ten masks, each of which represented multiple roles. The acting in *Zip* was impersonal (as in the übermarionette), thus marginalizing the ego of the performer. The set was an exhibition of Futurist and Dadaist art: collages and ready-mades were based on the theme of the accumulation of objects in a consumer society. The structure of the performance was musical: adagios and crescendos were intertwined, unravelled and dissolved according to an arranged score.

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Mario Ricci had worked at the Theatre of Marionettes in Sweden with Michael Meschke in the early sixties. His first contact with the Italian avant-garde was a collaboration with certain members (notably Achille Perilli) of Group '63 . In 1964, he opened a small theatre in Rome.

Ricci's "theatre" was limited to lights and objects and his historical source was the Bauhaus. He was most directly influenced by Oskar Schlemmer, who had first considered the movements of elementary matter and form to be theatre. Ricci's method was to take an *objet trouvé* and to insert it, along with its realistic associations, into an order of abstract movements. One of his early pieces, which lasted only fifteen minutes, utilized rusty stove pipes of various sizes. Ricci wrote a description of it:

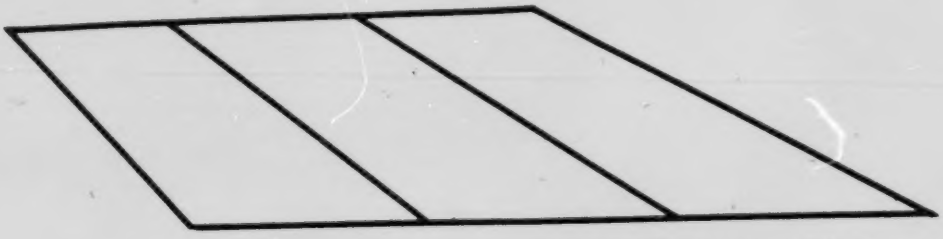
> *The piece begins with a cock crow repeated three times; then, from above, seven pipes of different lengths and diameters are alternately lowered into the scene—not according to a definite score but to our mood on that particular night.*

This concept allowed Ricci to eliminate scenography as the container of the action. The scene was the visual action itself, created by the movement of the objects. The meaning, according to the poetics of Group '63, was not associated conventionally to the signs. There was no "objective correspondent" that could be easily identified. Ricci's ordering principle was that of "play": an activity with its own rules and justification outside the ordinary concepts of time and space. Like the poet Balestrini's collages, which gratuitously ennoble street slang and journalistic cliché in metric verses—or the poetry of Giuliani, which inserts cocktail party palaver in a ritual of hospitality—Ricci's performances similarly bestow an artistic value upon raw and common materials by presenting them in the context of a "play" whose formal essence is rite.

Ricci posited a human "object" in his kinetic/visual work for the first time in *Varietà* (*Variety*, 1965). The action consisted of erecting a structure of iron pipes. The

noise of the nuts and bolts was rarified and fused with a tape of overlapping voices manipulated by John Cage. The tempo was very slow. For an entr'acte, Ricci used a row of half-marionettes dancing a can-can. Their faces and upper bodies were painted on a wood-backed poster, but their legs were animated. Finally, inside the pipe structure, a girl undressed, but under her clothing she was entirely wrapped in bandages, like a mummy. The slow motion and extremely detailed nature of the movements created a hypnotic effect that relaxed the spectators' attention and solicited the oneiric process. This can be counted as an antecedent to Robert Wilson's work.

Ricci, however, eventually shifted toward visual interpretations of works of literature (*Gulliver's Travels*, 1966; *James Joyce*, 1968; *Moby Dick*, 1971; and others.)



Left: Eugenio Barba
Right: Dario Fo

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Teatro 101 was founded by former students of the University Theatre of Rome (Antonio Calenda, Gigi Proietti, Virginio Gazzolo) in a small basement. Its main production was a play written by Corrado Augias, *Direzione Memorie (Direction Memories)*, staged in 1966. The set was a false perspective of a line of beds in a psychiatric hospital; the dominant color was white. The situation and dialog proposed a "narrative" version of avant-garde fragmentation and nondevelopment of the plot. The fragmented structure was thematically justified by the characters' mental illness; their "action" was to relive over and over again the same scenes. The theme of *Direction Memories* was the stalemate reached by lives without growth or progress. It was stated through a style of "poor theatre," though still rooted in realist expressionism.

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Teatro Porcospino, sponsored and directed by a group of outstanding writers (Moravia, Pasolini, Siciliano and Maraini), was located in a deconsecrated church in the center of Rome. Gian Maria Volonte opened the theatre in 1965 by staging Hochhuth's *The Deputy*, a play that was banned in Rome. Teatro Porcospino was a laboratory for written dramaturgy; the writers who were involved were conscious of the need for direct involvement in the creation of new theatre. A version of *The Spanish Tragedy* by Thomas Kyd, elaborated by Siciliano and Maraini, was staged by Roberto Guicciardini in 1966. It was contemporary with Ronconi's staging of Middleton and Rowley's *The Changeling*. In both cases, a rediscovery of Elizabethan dramaturgy had been made, but unlike Peter Brook's preoccupation with the cruel and magical aspects of it, these plays demonstrated, rather, a *structuralist* concern for the "code" of this dramaturgy. Siciliano wrote in the foreword:

> The Spanish Tragedy *represents the "canon" of Elizabethan theatre, the code of its situations, where you can find Seneca, Machiavelli and the "modern" sensibility. It is a canon which all Elizabethan playwrights have observed, from the anonymous author of* Alphonsus, Emperor of Germany *to Webster and Shakespeare. You find it in the idea of revenge as moral obsession, the evocation of the dead, the theatre within the theatre as a device for the resolution of the plot, and the standard figure of the wicked architect of the plot.*

• • •

Luca Ronconi's career as an innovative force in new Italian theatre began in 1966 with his staging of *The Changeling*. In this sinister story of multiple crimes, Ronconi transformed the psychological *vraisemblance* of the acting into a physical symbolization of moral values. A character's inner vice was represented as a physical deformity: a mask. The narrative structure was represented in its original form, but the expressionistic rendering of the characters as maniacal by the use of baroque exaggeration of gesture and speech deprived the narrative of its progressive development. All the

elements of the drama were given to the audience at the onset. The wicked, for example, wore horrible makeup. They dressed and used a style of acting that identified them at once. Like characters in the commedia dell'arte, they were allowed a certain amount of variation but no real surprises. Although the events of the play were presented in a linear order, the spectator received it as a static whole that had to be analyzed synchronically. There was no perception of a "story."

In 1968, Ronconi merged his structuralist ideas with environmental methods in *Orlando Furioso*, an ingenious attempt at audience participation. Sanguineti, of Group '63, collaborated on the dramaturgic treatment of Ariosto's Renaissance romance. The text was disassembled from its original form, which was an intertwining of several narratives or *cantari* (bard's poems). In Ronconi's production, four characters (Orlando, Rinaldo, Angelica and Sacripante), the protagonists of four selected *cantari*, performed both as *cantastorie* speaking of the character in the third person and as *pupi* (Sicilian puppets) speaking in the first person. The various actions were simul-

Scabia's *Gorilla*

taneously presented on different stages, some of them moveable. The individual spectator was free to choose whichever scene most appealed to him, rather like being at a fair where several hawkers compete for one's attention. During parts of the performance, the spectator was physically involved and given a role in the action. For example, he could be part of a crowd listening to a speech, one of the citizens of Paris, a frightened onlooker to the battle between the Moslems and the Christians or he could be entangled with the actors in a labyrinth.

Ronconi divided the performance into "closed" units that, added to one another, resulted in a sort of "verticality." Sanguineti explains:

> *What is deliberately missing is the* tension of continuity. *Because the performance is fragmented and dismantled, its structure has nothing to do with the original one. And this reflects the way in which I worked on it: not aiming at creating a* crescendo, *a tension of relations but aiming at a real* verticality *of the text. Every moment is a "closed" moment.*

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In the years between 1967 and 1971, a great change occurred in Italian theatre. We have reviewed thus far the issues that concerned the avant-garde through examples of its leading proponents. We have arrived at the point at which even Ronconi felt the need to recognize the social aspects of performance. The trend began to move toward socially and politically oriented theatre throughout Italy.

In 1969, Giuliano Scabia created a text from a series of discussions and confrontations with the working class. *General Clashes* solicited audience participation not only in the performance but in the actual writing of the text. The project was opposed by the Communist bureaucracy, and it was not staged in the same place it had been put together. The effect that the play had was negligible. Scabia was disappointed by the results and began to orient his research toward a new social methodology of dramaturgic intervention and sociological analysis.

The goal of reaching an alternative public was vigorously pursued by Dario Fo. In 1968, he founded a theatrical movement of the revolutionary left called La Comunità, which soon became active in many cities with the support of students and activists. La Comunità travelled outside the usual circuits, as Scabia had done, but its purpose in so doing was specifically to propagandize through the use of didactic farce and political caricature. The performances were actual political manifestations, including speeches, debates and passing the hat for incarcerated comrades.

Carlo Quartucci made his move toward the community in a white truck that carried shows and video tapes to the poor and marginal audiences in the suburbs and villages. These performances were open to audience participation in the form of discussion and creative contribution (folklore elements, songs and dances). *Il Camion (The Truck)* still continues, as does the Living Theatre's *Legacy of Cain*, accumulating new material and ideas along the road.

Community theatres, or *gruppi di base*, did, in fact, flower all over Italy, either as local political projects or as followers of Grotowski's laboratory example. Of these latter, Eugenio Barba's influence has been most extensive.

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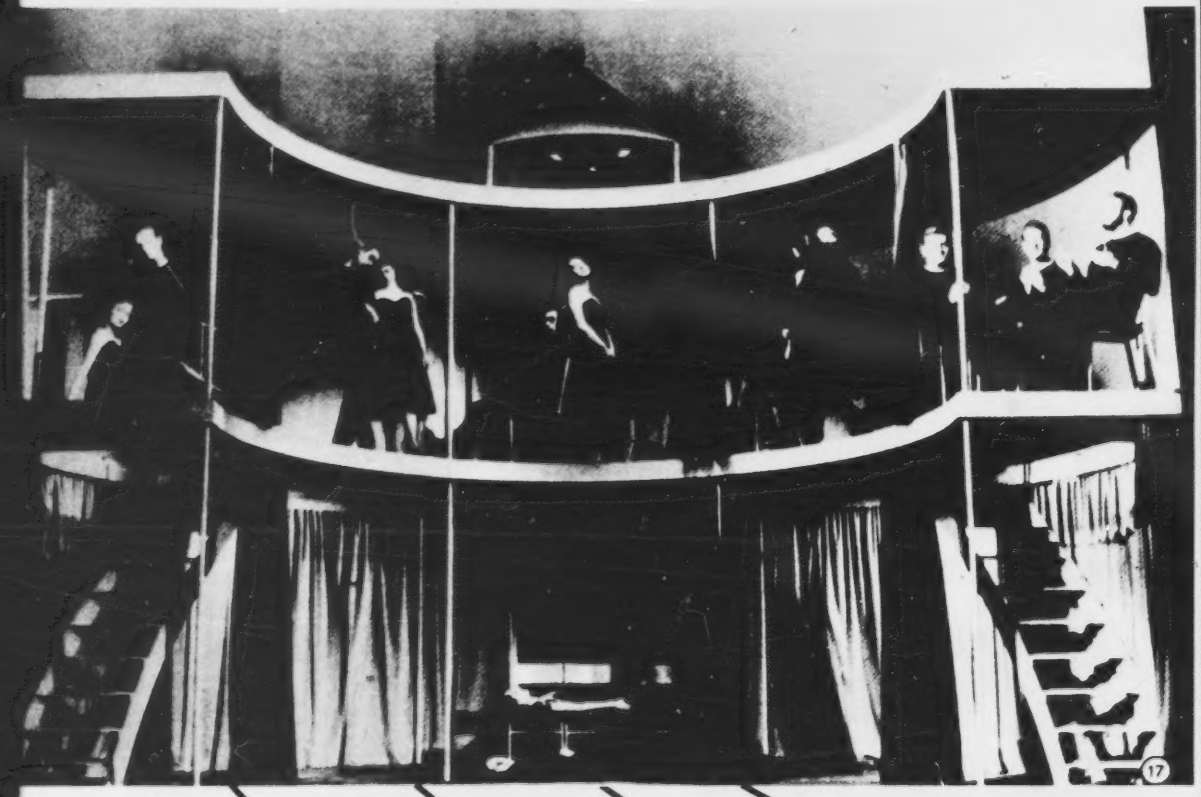
The new wave of political, community or participational theatre far from summed up the development of Italian theatre after 1968. Mario Missiroli, a former assistant to Giorgio Strehler, introduced a personal variation of the grotesque genre while working with Teatro Porcospino. Although he was personally committed to political change, Missiroli considered the primary responsibility of the theatre to be a "revolution" of its own style. He wrote: "The theatre can be revolutionary insofar as it revolutionizes itself, not in trying to bring off the political revolution."

This statement was a defense of parody as a weapon to be used against cultural and social models. Missiroli, though, unlike so many other masters of parody, needed the kind of written plays that would serve "a black and indecent theatre that denied any appeasing synthesis." He found such writing in the Polish avant-garde: in the classic Witkievitch and the exiled Gombrovitch. These playwrights particularly fit the

style of social and cultural parody that had occupied the attention of so much of the Italian avant-garde. The caricature of a vulgar bourgeois awkwardly assuming aristocratic mannerisms, the aggressive attitude toward the clerical roots of social habits (Poland and Italy are both Catholic countries), the futile revolutionary assertions of the petty bourgeois—all these situations correspond surprisingly to the basic thematics of, for example, Bene's work.

Missiroli staged *The Marriage* by Gombrovitch at the Teatro Centrale in Rome in 1968 and *The Revolting Comedy of a Mother* by Witkievitch at the same theatre in 1969. In both plays, the set was an apartment and the theme was the abominable life of the bourgeois family. The characters were caught in an identity crisis, trying to resolve the discrepancy between the petty, phony, greedy world they inhabit and its idealistic, religious model. This contradiction was represented in *The Marriage* by a double level of dream and reality and the protagonist's frustrated attempts to bridge them.

In some ways, *The Marriage* was a step backward in the avant-garde movement to the formal autonomy of stage language. It was also, however, a perfect thematization—comprehensive in the written text—of some of the forms that the Italian avant-garde had taken. Missiroli provided the movement with a more accurate consciousness of the implications of their language: an active analysis of the theatre itself.



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Giancarlo Cobelli began as a mime and worked in cabaret. He performed in *The Can Can of the Italians* in 1963 and *The Caserne of the Fairies* in 1964. In 1969, he joined Comunità Emilia-Romagna, a group that applied the method of collective creation to their work.

The first play that the group staged was Aristophanes' *The Birds*, a choral experience in which collective, corporal improvisations were the core of the production. The program notes show the affinity of this work with the Living Theatre's *Antigone* or the Open Theatre's *The Serpent:*

> *The gestural material in the first stage of the creation (birth of the community of birds, joy-pain at the arrival of man, hatred and battle) was elaborated in a mood of happy group creation through the collective acceptance of a series of single proposals.*

This method did not, however, consistently determine the form that the performance would take. There were individual roles that in some cases marginalized the collective process or made it function merely as an illustration. Unlike their American counterparts, who based their theatre-communities on total, radical estrangement from the political and cultural mainstream, Comunità rooted itself and its work in the Communist region of Emilia-Romagna. The group itself, enacting its own life style and rituals, was not the message. There was always a play—though not necessarily done as a narrative—and the performance always played down the existential aspects in favor of the political.

As for Giancarlo Cobelli, he eventually drifted away from the movement that he had helped to introduce and began working in the burlesque genre. His variations on burlesque use a stage disposition reminiscent of classic Greek theatre (a heritage, perhaps, from *The Birds*). Choral action provides an ironic, sometimes disquieting commentary on the central "agonistic" scenes.

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As soon as the avant-garde became publicly accepted and established in the official theatres, another crop, manifesting substantially new characteristics, came up in the various cellars and small theatres of Rome. As a reaction against the cultural allusiveness of the former school, these authors introduced a new kind of experimentation that was, in some cases, programatically ignorant, in order to redefine a positive theatrical language. Their work has been dismissed as esoteric and elitist by the supporters of the cooperative movement, who maintain that formal research should only be done in order to make contact with an alternative public. But the Roman School, as it has come to be known, was never characterized by social concerns. Their work paralleled a similar tendency in the United States. Robert Wilson, Meredith Monk and Richard Foreman were restoring the notion of theatre as a ritual of the imagination that, either seriously or ironically, exposes and analyzes itself. Their influence, however, did not have its impact on the Italian groups until the seventies.

The Roman School in the late sixties continued to be influenced by Cage and Duchamp, whose ideas were assimilated into the local Dadaism of early Carmelo Bene. Manuela Kusterman, the "star" of Nanni's Teatro La Fede, had previously acted with Bene. She borrowed from him a style of provocative egomania, estranged delivery, love of kitsch, eccentric costumes and a taste for the maliciously interpreted fairy tale. As Bene had been Pinocchio, Kusterman was Alice. The Teatro La Fede used the Dadaist technique of breaking down the structure of the text into a montage of fragments that could respond to associative stimuli. Language was deprived of its informational function, used alogically and fused with "spontaneously" arranged lights, sounds and movements.

A Dadaist classic, *The Emperor of China* by Ribemont-Dessaignes, was staged by the group in 1969. It was an occasion for Nanni to test out his method, which was basically one of free improvisation and collective creation. But unlike other groups

that have worked similarly, La Fede used this method to elicit ironic symbolization with erotic implications and caricature. The style is more baroque than austere.

After staging *A for Alice*, a theatrical version of "Alice in Wonderland," the group produced what may be considered its most representative work, *Spring's Awakening* by Frank Wedekind, in 1972. Nanni's first step was to develop a series of nonillustrative drawings, pictorial suggestions and images that unconsciously reflected the theme of the play: the awakening of the senses. Then the actors, through improvisations, created a gestural vocabulary with which to express their first impressions of the text. Finally, the text was fed into the improvisations fragment by fragment without sequential order. An actor often played more than one character and certain characters were represented by more than one actor. The result of this procedure was a syncretism of styles. Wedekind's images, originally expressionistic, were turned into Dada affrontery (the mother was played by a transvestite clown with two breasts on his back). The lyrical dialog of the original text became explosive and tense. The performance was a hybrid, at the same time poetic and clownish, where "gestural ideograms" (a suicide was represented by an actor spinning with his head between the rungs of a ladder) coexisted with expressionistic caricatures (the lion tamer was wrapped in a tiger skin with a tail, wore a pipe hat on her head and exposed a bright red breast).

Memé Perlini acted in all of Nanni's productions until *Spring's Awakening*. At that time, he began to direct his own group, La Maschera.

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Giuliano Vasilicò and Giorgio Marini have expressed little interest in dramatic plays. Their concern has focused upon language, be it the language of drama, novels or poems. Whereas Nanni and Perlini are after a multifocal reflection of a given text—a sort of combined arrangement or collective enactment—Vasilicò and Marini work much less impressionistically. They begin with a linguistic analysis of the text, then try to produce a theatrical equivalent of the literary style. They differ from Ronconi in that they come to "author" their own scripts, thus giving full autonomy to the theatre experience. Vasilicò creates allegories and one of his most recurrent scenes is the onstage parade that acts as a continuum of the images and sounds.

Giorgio Marini is the director of a group called I Segni (The Signs). His literary model was originally Borges, with his disquieting structures, concentric circles, Chinese boxes and perpetual beginnings. Working on texts by Borges *(The Theologians)*, Fleur Jaeggi *(The Guardian Angel* and *A Streetcar Named Tallulah)* and Roberto Calasso *(The Impure Fool)*, he put his play scripts together by transcribing the literary structure used by the author into performance structure.

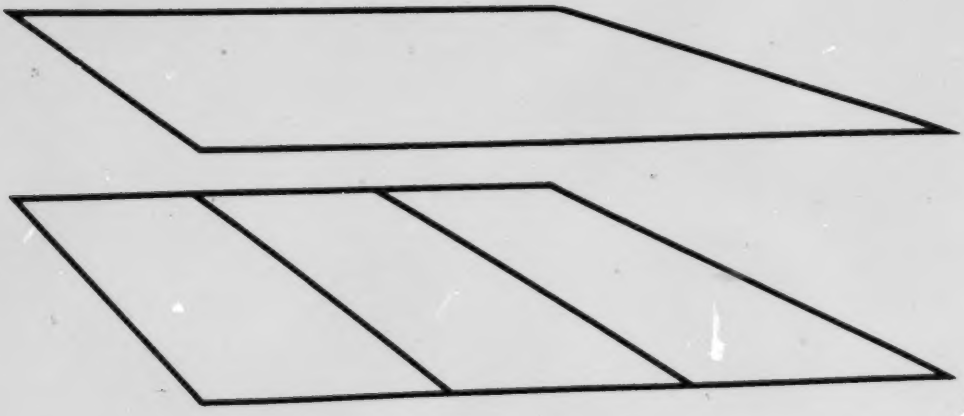
The Guardian Angel, for example, was the story of twin girls and their symmetrical relationship to their tutor. The sequence progressed through a series of strange symmetries; the second act was a mirror image of the first. Marini's style is generally more subtle and ironically gentle than the rest of the Italian avant-garde, which is dominated by aggression and Dada.

Dario Fo Explains

An Interview

by Luigi Ballerini

and Giuseppe Risso

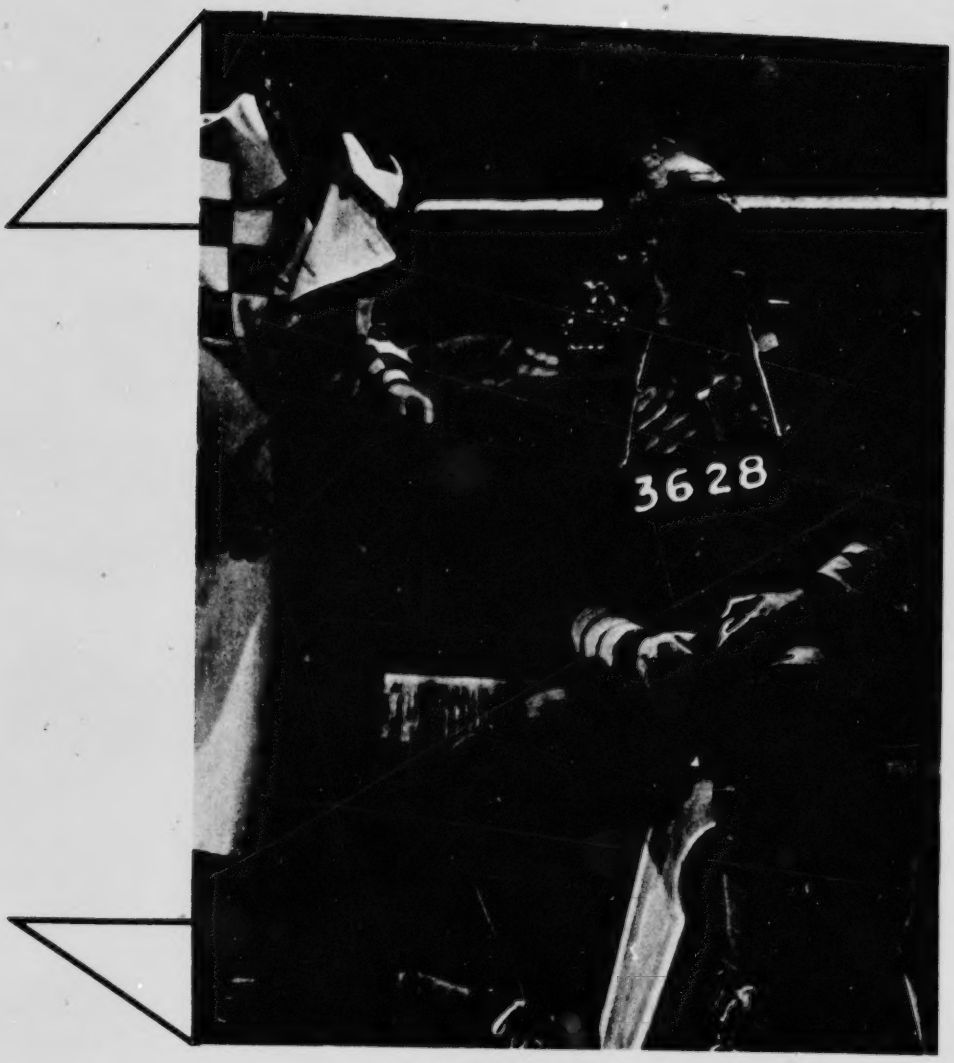


At the Rai Studios in Milan, Dario Fo is just finishing the editing of a series of shows to be aired in the Spring of 1978. We are at a delicate moment in the comedy *La signora e da buttare* (*The Lady Has To Be Thrown Away*), a satire of bourgeois imperialism. At this moment, parts of the dialog are being "reinforced." Dario's finger is pointed at the technician: "Here!" At his command, applause and laughter mingle artfully with the murmur of the audience.

The monitors reflect several sequences of Dario Fo's mocking face. He is a man of 50—actor, singer, dancer, mime, writer, impresario, choreographer, political activist, and a personality both feared and opposed, like one of the characters in the farces he realizes onstage: opposed by government, politicians, the church, and the petty bourgeois. He is the only actor in Italy who can boast of performances attended by 25,000 spectators; the only one whose visibility, in the history of postwar Italian theatre, can be compared with that of Eduardo DeFilippo and Strehler.

On the monitors, we watch a few scenes from the comedy that takes place under the tent of a 19th-century circus:

We hear a violent knocking at the window of the caravan. . . . The window opens and a vulture appears, evidently stuffed, its wings flapping. The clown Bob enters the scene.
Bob: Here it is again—the vulture (*pointing to the bird that opens its wings in the classic pose of the American Eagle*).
Other clowns enter noisily to watch the scene.
Clown Dario: (*moving toward the caravan*) Away! Away! Filthy animal! Damn beast! Your food isn't ready yet. . . . The old lady isn't dead yet . . . And even if she was dead a week and well tenderized—we wouldn't even give you a bite. . . . Everything to the hyena. Get it?
Voice of the old lady from behind the tent.
Old Lady: So who is it that's well tenderized?
The telephone, hanging from the caravan, rings. The nurse speaks into a hose which also serves as the source of oxygen for the old lady. Dario answers the phone.
Nurse: Hello. Who's the idiot making all this fucking noise?
Dario: The idiot is me. The noise is over.
Nurse: You managed to wake the old lady up.
Dario: It wasn't me, it was the vulture; (*to the vulture*) you filthy creep. But now, I'm gonna make you pay for it, over and out. (*He hangs up the phone and moves rapidly toward the caravan. He goes in. The vulture reenters from the window through which we can catch a glimpse of a violent fight between Dario and the vulture.*) Come here, sweetie. I've got to talk to you. . . . Ah! You turn on me!? Ouch! What a beak you've got! I'll pluck all your feathers out! Get this . . . all the feathers from your ass . . . and may you catch a nice cold on the above mentioned . . . and drop dead!
Squealing and croaking from the vulture. Dario comes out of the caravan cooling himself with a feather-fan.
Old Lady: (*barely audible*) Who's crying? Who makes my animals weep?
Nurse: It's nothing, Madam! Don't get excited. Go to sleep. Sleep. La la la la la. . . .
Lullaby.
Clowns: (*in chorus*) La la la . . . (*gathered at center stage, the clowns sway*).



Dario Fo in *La Signora e da buttare*

Preceded by a loud honking, a three-seater scooter with 3 passengers rushes onstage from the right. It runs over some of the clowns who fall pirouetting. The scooter, proceeding carelessly, exits.
Dario: Murderers, schmucks, bastards!
The old lady peeps out from the canopy of her bed holding a huge rifle, typical of the pioneers.
Old Lady: Injuns! Injuns! Quick—round up the wagons!
Nurse: No, no. It's not the Indians.
Old Lady: No. Well then, I guess I'll sleep. (*She disappears behind the canopy.*)

One reel is finished. Dario Fo comes to meet us.

TDR: *Your name is known throughout the world as an actor and an author of political satires. ("Now my plays are being performed in an incredible number of German, Swedish, Norwegian, Danish, Belgian and French theatres. My latest plays are being staged above all in West Germany, while those written thirty years ago are being given especially in East Germany, Poland, Bulgaria and the Soviet Union." It is curious to note that his more extreme political productions have found a forum in many so-called western democracies, while in the countries of Eastern Europe more emphasis is given to his early generically social satires, and perhaps solely to them.) In the U.S. are known, above all, the works that you have written in the last five or ten years. Would you briefly describe the development of your career, so as to give a more complete picture of your work, starting with your first experiences in cabaret. . . .*

Fo: That's inexact. . . . I've never done *cabaret*, but rather a form of theatre tied to popular traditions; if anything, in the framework of *avanspettacolo*. (A kind of variety theatre performed between two movie showings. It was very much in vogue in Italy between 1930–40.) All our comics, from Petrolini himself, to Ferravilla and Scarpetta have all contributed to this type of theatre.

When, for example, we did *Il dito nell'occhio* (*The Finger in the Eye*) with the Piccolo Teatro (twenty years ago), the ambience was not that of a cabaret—the space itself, 700 seats, the stage being twelve to thirteen yards wide, the complete set, the number of people acting (there were twelve of us), and finally, the concept of the piece, which, yes, was a string of sketches, but had a logical continuity of its own. *Il dito nell'occhio* was based upon a story whose origins go back to the goliard tradition, but mixed with elements from *commedia dell'arte* and modified by my experience with the theatre of Strehler, who, at that time, was truly revolutionary. It had little to do with the French or German tradition in *cabaret*. That is, it was something better than *cabaret*, which forces one to adopt a certain unnatural format: a café performance requires a very private and intimate form of speaking. With us, instead, everything was flung out: the action, the amount of physical expression inherent in our way of acting—a pantomime learned not from the tradition of the white mime (Pierrot) but from commedia dell'arte. In short, we had with us Lecoq who had worked with Moretti, (the famous Arlecchino in *Arlecchino servitore di due padroni*, staged by Strehler in 1947. Lecoq was a pupil of Moretti) whose experience went back to Paduan theatre; De Bosio, (theatre and movie director best known for his staging of Ruzanti), the works of Ruzante, Zanies, Harlequins and so forth. We were working along these lines. Moreover, there was a popular element that consisted of the storyteller's visual narration, and this element we used rather explicitly and directly.

The source of my work before *Il dito nell'occhio* is in fact that of the storyteller. I started twenty-five years ago. Then, also, I recaptured the jester's tradition. The storyteller and the jester are two fixed points, the former going back to the 17th–18th century, while the latter, the jester, is medieval. But the key is the same; they have the same dimension. I had learned it from the storytellers of the north shore of Lake Maggiore, where I was born and where I lived. It is a tradition that has disappeared, like the balladeers are disappearing in Sicily and the mountebanks or the "poets," as they say in Tuscany (both storytellers and jesters). I learned this lesson early in life from the storytellers

IL DITO NELL'OCCHIO

who told their stories not in the squares but in taverns or along the lake while people were fishing. There were those who told their stories to children, to the common folk who gathered around them, and one might say they were paid in kind.

Another influence has been the puppet theatre—hand puppets, not marionettes. Finally, I was acquainted with a popular form of epic theatre staged by traveling players, who performed plots based on 15th-century stories such as *Romeo and Juliet* (not the Shakespearean version but the Lombard one), *Othello*, melodramas with enticing titles such as *Sin Avenges Sin*. The players would stay for a month or so and then move on to another village.

At that time, right after the war, I got involved in the birth of the Piccolo Teatro, which meant an enormous change in the general conception of theatre and of the role of the actor. In my town, I was considered as one who had mastered the teachings of the storytellers. Little by little, I had collected many traditional tales, and others I had invented myself. They all had either Biblical motifs or were based on the clichés of a melodramatic tradition or

inspired by sensationalist news items of the day, which I obviously rendered in a satirical way. . . .

My decision, then, to do theatre was not traumatic, instead, it was a natural development. I was a student of architecture and I really started for fun: first in my home town, Luino, then in Varese; eventually I also did something in Milan. It was then that I met Franco Parenti (among the first actors of the Piccolo Teatro), with whom I put together shows that were fragmentary and a little amateurish. Finally, still with Parenti and the Nava sisters (Pinuccia, Diana and Lisetta Nava, famous Italian soubrettes of the 1950's), I did a variety show in which my role was really that of a storyteller. It was a show with chorus girls, skits, and it was there that I learned to dance, sing, etc.

TDR: *Who wrote the texts?*

Fo: In the beginning I wrote my own texts, then in collaboration with Durano (author and actor, active in variety theatre and radio programs. His early success has considerably slackened after the days of his collaboration with Fo and Parenti), with whom I worked for about a year after the experience with the Nava. Soon after, Parenti, Durano, Lecoq and I staged *Il dito nell'occhio*, which caused a huge stir. The scene was more or less fixed as in the Elizabethan theatre. There were no costumes. There were simply props, a platform, etc., and we wore nothing but black leotards. It ran for a whole summer at the Piccolo Teatro in Milan—a real shock, especially because of the amount of pantomime and the great precision of the improvisations. The performance was always changing, adjusting, modifying itself according to the reactions of the public.

TDR: *How were these texts realized—at your desk or through experimentation onstage?*

Fo: At the beginning, the text was constructed directly on the stage. Actually, every time I tried to stage a text that I had written, read, and reread, we always arrived at a crisis point during rehearsals, so that we had to elaborate and rewrite. Then, we would try it out on an audience, and I would continue to rework it. This holds true for the duration of my experience within a conventional theatrical framework.

Later, things became even more complicated. Many texts result from downright investigations. Once the investigation is completed, we read the text to our public or, better yet, to those people who directly support our work: laborers, students, workers on strike, members of cultural and political organizations. Texts are discussed; then rewritten; then rehearsed first without, then with, our public; staged a third time only to be questioned all over again. Certain plays, like *Pum Pum qui e la polizia* (*Bam Bam! It's the Police*), *Pinelli*, or *Si paga non si paga* (*To Pay or Not To Pay*) have been completely rewritten three or four times. There are three different versions of *Pum Pum qui e la polizia*. . . . the texts are torn apart, composed and recomposed all the time. For example, the original *Grande Pantomima per pupazzi piccoli e medi* (*Great Pantomime for Small and Medium-Sized Puppets*) was transformed, after two years, into something completely different. Even the title was changed.

TDR: *The public, then, plays an essential role in your productions. . . .*

Fo: Generally speaking, theatre today is still an intellectual product consumed by the public. There is, however, a *public* that attends only that type of perfor-

mance capable of involving it because it is directly related to political actions. Let's take an example: some of our performances were born and died in the course of two or three days. Let's say that we would give a performance in support of someone being tried in court, as in the case of the Marini trial (young activist of the leftist movement). There, we did an outdoor performance with the townspeople, recounting, in a grotesque and satirical way, the trial itself and, along with it, certain events that had taken place a century earlier in that very same place. We told them about the rebellion of "bandits," who were no other than the peasants from the hinterland of Salerno. We wanted to show that the symptoms of rebellion, oppression, and repression were constant features analogous to those that marked the trial that was now taking place. This performance we gave only twice.

It happened, also, in Pescara. . . . There was a trial against fifty rebellion prisoners . . . and we staged a counter-trial. I could give you countless examples. There is a kind of theatre that we call "Immediate Intervention" and, indeed, in this case, we must act rapidly. Three days after the bombing incidents in Brescia (one of the many Fascist acts of terrorism that have plagued Italian life in the last decade. The bombs exploded during a political rally. Many people died and many more were wounded), we performed in the same square where these events had taken place, with 5,000 to 10,000 people overflowing into the adjacent square because it was larger.

TDR: *Are these texts of Immediate Intervention based on documentation of facts?*

Fo: We begin with an inquiry. For instance, we went to Brescia and we asked for people's versions of the events . . . the performance included excerpts from previous work, though they were adapted through improvisation to a new format. The performance for Chile was one that changed from place to place, because of the various ways in which the audience participated. I don't know if you know this, but since many of our performances had been raided by the police, we decided to plant our own policemen led by a commissar—all imposters—who would interrupt the show. Some of our people would be carried off to the police station to be arrested . . . we provoked our audiences and there was always a great tension . . . people's anger was on the verge of exploding every minute. Some went so far as to pull out knives and assault the commissar.

TDR: *At the beginning of your theatrical work what political party did you identify with?*

Fo: With the communist party. We were immediately spotted. We had to contend with Scelba's police (a Christian Democrat. Minister of the Interior. His name is linked with one of the darkest moments in the history of the Italian police force), censorship, innumerable difficulties. Our performances were boycotted all the time. It was a real persecution.

TDR: *Did the communist newspaper follow your activities? Did it back you up or keep you under surveillance?*

Fo: It backed us up, but the timing as always late. The first ones to act were the students, then the leftist intellectuals, then the laborers; finally, the communist party . . . but then again, they never did very much for us . . . the PCI always felt a reverence for the official culture. Our work was accepted, above all, by the rank and file, but there were also some intellectuals who were supportive. Togliatti (The famous secretary of the communist party, which he had founded with Antonio Gramsci in 1921.) for example, liked many of our works.

I remember seeing him in the audience once. He was still bandaged after an assassination attempt on his life. Actually, a year had already passed . . . and he had a bodyguard. He came to see us at the Piccolo Teatro at the end of the season—toward September . . . he was enthusiastic.

There were always debates over the type of theatrical philosophy that we espoused. Many intellectuals, however, didn't make any effort to understand. One who did understand immediately and even wrote an important article on us was Vito Pandolfi. But it's well known the party never considered Pandolfi orthodox . . . in short, a large part of the masses supported us and also the more intellectually sophisticated segment of the bourgeosie. At the same time, certain critics like D'Amico (founder of the Italian Academy of Dramatic Art) could not stomach a theatre with a clearly defined political basis and one so obviously opposed to the elitist type of theatre that they loved and promoted. Then there was the problem of verbal texts versus mime and the art of physical gesture . . . not that we went overboard with gesture, but it certainly was the first time that gesture was treated on an equal basis with words. All this, while the prevailing mentality still extolled the written, not the spoken, word.

A new interruption. The scenes on the investigations of President Kennedy's assassination from the comedy *La signora e da buttare* are on the monitors.

Clown Bob: We've got proof!
Clown Arturo: What Proof? Tell me what I shot her with.
C. Bob: With this. (*He puts a gun in Arturo's hand.*) You can all testify that we caught him with the weapon in his hand.
C. Arturo: What are you talking about? It's a water gun! (*To demonstrate, he turns to the clown closest to him and squirts some water in his face.*)
C. Dario (*in the fashion of a town crier*): Exactly. In fact, the old lady drowned.
Clowns (*in chorus*): That's right.
C. Valerio: Let's not exaggerate. How could she have drowned?
C. Dario: You're right. We've exaggerated just a bit. Actually, how did she die?
C. Valerio: The truth is—the murderer used a technically advanced weapon of the greatest precision: an Italian model '91 with a sight. Here it is. (*He shows them the gun.*)
C. Dario: Where is the sight?
C. Valerio: Here. (*He slides a pair of spectacles along the barrel of the gun.*)
Clowns (*in chorus*): Amazing!
C. Valerio: With one bullet?
C. Bob: Just one.
C. Valerio: . . . he managed to hit the old lady three times plus the chauffeur and a stray dog, not to mention the back-right tire of an ice-cream cart.
All the Clowns: Unbelievable! How did he do it?
C. Valerio: Quiet. Listen to the ballistics expert. How *did* he do it? *A blackboard is brought onstage. It is covered with lines and diagrams. Dario will use it to give a scientific demonstration of the ballistic puzzle. The clowns follow him as he moves along the complicated trajectory of the bullet, which he physically describes from one end of the stage to the other.*

Two scenes from *Isabella, tre caravelle e un cacciaballe*

C. Dario: It's extremely simple. As we can clearly see on the blackboard, the old lady's murderer was here at point A, that is to say, on platform #1; there he is. An amateur would have aimed directly at point B, where the old lady was. But we are dealing with a specialist. He aims exactly in the opposite direction, at platform #4. The bullet hits the post; bounces back and goes to hit, for the first time, the old lady at point B. It goes through her and strikes the bell of the telephone we see here at a point which we will call Alpha. A new rebound; the bullet lands here with an angle of 116 degrees in the direction of the lamppost, on top of which a stray dog is perched. God knows what it's doing there at the top instead of being at the bottom where he should be, according to the rules. The investigation will clarify this.
C. Bob: Naturally.
C. Dario: The bullet rebounds—not the stray dog, that remains in his place. As we were saying, the bullet rebounds and travels in the direction of the shooter, who, with a baseball bat in hand, sends it once again (*with extreme precision*) back to the old lady. It hits the old lady a second time, goes through her again, and again hits the telephone bell. The impact on the bell, this time, as we can clearly deduce from the markings at point Beta, causes no longer, as before, a rebounding linear trajectory, but a curvilinear one which, moving in the opposite direction describes a type of parabola known in technical language as Archimede's Protoparabola. A new impact on the ground and a new rebound toward the lamppost on which, in the meantime, has climbed the rescuer of the stray dog: the old lady's chauffeur. The chauffeur, with the bullet in his mouth, bounces toward the shooter who, with a baseball bat, hits him on the back of the head forcing him to spit out the bullet, which then moves along the above-mentioned trajectory and goes through the old lady a third

time. The bullet would have run its course ad infinitum had it not been for the fact that the tire of the ice-cream push cart found itself in its path. It was this tire, then, that literally brought to an end the mad race of the bullet. Stop. We'll return after a brief message.

TDR: *Let's go back for a second to what you were saying about a theatre with a clearly identifiable political base—that is, if I'm not mistaken, to a theatre understood as a place where not only the conflict between destiny and its modifications is defined, but also where one proposes a physical model of willpower capable of excluding, overcoming, or redeeming the censorship implied by any established truth. . . .*

Fo: This is the basis of all theatre, the fundamental key to everything . . . They've always told us that classical theatre is above everything and everyone, that it has nothing to do with class struggle. No, classical theatre is fundamentally a class theatre, planned, written, and developed by one social class to defeat another. You can talk as much as you want about Shakespeare, about the moon and the purity of poetry, etc. Shakespeare's themes reflected class problems. At one moment he sides with power and at another he doesn't, according to the political events of his time. You cannot take Shakespeare out of context with what happened to other poets and writers such as Marlowe, Ford, etc., who were subjected to indirect or even direct repression or death. Men such as these were burned at the stake or met with horrible ends one way or another.

Or else, to point out interpretations that normally are not even mentioned, let's take the theme of *Alcestis*. Let us ask ourselves what is the meaning of a woman's role in a society where she can only sacrifice herself for someone? For her husband, for the male who stands for an entire history, for humanity itself. She can reach the maximum of her glory only by renouncing her own life, thus enabling the male to continue with his.

It isn't an accident that these themes were dealt with. Think of the reactionary dimension of those writers who exploited and reversed popular tradition. Aristophanes, for example. It's more than evident in the way in which they antagonized women. There were feminist movements in those days compared to which today's movement is almost laughable: feminist communism, women fighting for their own rights. How else would one want to read the official comedies of the satirists, if not as a testimony of the attempt to destroy these extraordinary thrusts coming from the popular movement.

TDR: *Don't you think, however, these thrusts should be nourished not only by* antagonistic *investigation, but in a truly "tragic" way by a sense of ulteriority and by a courage capable of reconnecting the proponents of those thrusts to the* agonistic *areas of life, that is, those areas where existing and being reflect on one another: the world of enigma, for example—the course of a truth understood as a "wonder" or "awesomeness" and not as "revelation" or "accommodation" to a deduction?*

Fo: I would put it in simpler terms. As far as my, our, experience goes, I would have to say that when I started to have a sense of theatre and my role in it, I realized that there were two fundamental aspects of it that I then found aptly formulated by Brecht, Meyerhold, the theorists of epic drama. What were they? They were what in correct terminology I could today call the "literary" concept of theatre on the one hand and, on the other, the concept of the "situation," which is fundamental.

What do I mean by literary concept? The text first and above all. This notion belongs to a precise social class, that which controls the power.

Opposed to it, there is another theatric lexicon composed of text, pause, rhythm; a lexicon in which, many times, the word is dependent upon an action or a situation. "Situation" means thrusting ahead the conflicts that exist between people; it is *this* conflict that occupies the stage. It even precedes the literary text.

In order to liberate the actor from this pseudo-responsibility of having to represent an other, Molière, in the tradition of *commedia dell'arte*, resorted to the construction of a proscenium, an *avantscène*, forcing the actor to step out of the frame. In this way, he practically destroys the scene, that is to say, the atmosphere, the physical box within which the actor was belittled by the very things that were to support him; voices, sounds, and above all, the physical dimensions of the stage. Without a supportive dimension, Molière said, the actor must himself be the scene, the sound, etc., and Meyerhold added that when an actor needs the tweet-tweet of the birds to create an atmosphere of dawn, this means that he does not have enough power to create it through his gestures, voice, rhythms, tempo. He is the dawn, not the spotlights dimming or brightening, producing cold rather than warm light, and so forth. Molière eliminated all scenic effects. This means that the actor must be the exclusive renderer of whatever happens, that he does not have to wear a robe to become a character, but to become a mask.

So, what is this mask? The mask is the dialectical synthesis of conflicts, whereas a character carries with him conflicts without ever achieving their synthesis. He thus tries to be himself, that is, to identify completely with his role and to recount his own *trippe*, as Molière said, the disturbances of his own self. So the actor is an individual entity, while the mask is collective, because it tells of a general concern. In still other words, it is the voice of the story, not the means of acting it out. It is not I who identify with what I present onstage. Rather, I can criticize, suggest conflicts, contradictions, hypocrisies, and comment under any circumstance. This is the epic fact, the estrangement. The estrangement gives the actor the same possibilities that the puppets give the puppeteer. This is theatre's fundamental ideological condition. And this is drama.

In a basically literary theatre . . . Chekhov, a fundamental pivot . . . also, our more recent authors (Pirandello, for instance) did nothing but perpetuate the notion of actor as self-actualizer. Identification. And so, what happens? The spectator is reduced to a voyeur: someone who is there to steal a naturalistic event that is proposed time and again as if it were real life. Even the time sequence is that of a real action . . . more or less. Agreed, it is shortened, synthesized—but it is presented as if it were real.

The other kind of theatre, instead, destroys completely the notion of historical time because events are not modelled on it, there is only the time of the narration—the synthesis of the telling. The very fact that Chekhov and Pirandello eliminate the prolog is no mere accident. The prolog, in fact, reveals everything, takes away the possibility of unforseeable events, the suspense.

TDR *Indeed, in classical tragedy, the whole fact is known ahead of time.*

Fo: Of course. It is all told in advance. Also, in the theatre of the late 18th century, everything is unfolded prior to the action. What counts is the manner of the

unfolding, the special machinery reinvented each time on a known theme. How it ends is not important at all; it is a literary degeneration that allows you to capitalize on irrational emotivity and on a sequence of tricks.

TDR: *It is a form of cultural terrorism: I know how it ends, you don't. Therefore . . . There is, however, something else that I would like you to clarify. We have this pseudo-theatre, then a theatre that describes approximately, your area of activity: counter-information set off by fact. How do you evaluate that third type of theatre that we could call "formalistic" theatre; one dedicated to the search for a new theatric language and also, really, a new word language in theatre. Artaud comes immediately to mind.*

Fo: The new language . . . you see, I read Artaud in a different way. . . . He is important to me because he gave me the courage to reutilize the *grammelot*—the newest language and the oldest of them all, buried in literature because it cannot be rewritten. It must be reinvented every time because it depends so much on the relationship created with the audience. The pace is determined by their laughter, their stillness, the magical mood. I do mean magic, especially when speaking about Artaud, which is not coercion, but the play of the imagination, of the imaginary reconstruction of the world. I think we have worked in the direction of a new language. Take, for example, certain Italian singers' mode of performing: before they begin to sing they know that the song is a pretext to speak, to tell, to invent, etc. These singers are in the *grammelot* tradition, in the storyteller's tradition. Once, it was possible to say "And now a song from Maestro Angelini (conductor. Some of his tunes were extremely popular during the 1940's and 1950's) and his orchestra . . ."; today, that's no longer done. Instead, singers talk, chat, narrate, in short, they have rediscovered the prolog. Many times, the songs themselves don't matter much . . . as I said, they are a pretext. . . .

TDR: *Let's go back to your experience with the Piccolo Teatro.*

Fo: Yes, there we were able to create a rapport between literary and grassroots theatre . . . My experience with Il Piccolo was very important . . . Above all because of the mimes I worked with: Covelli and those two very good actresses Galvani and Ridoni, Franca, Tairanti, who later married Parenti, and others. (Dario Fo mentions the names of actors who did not become very well known, with the exception, that is, of Franca (Rame), his wife. She is the daughter of a traveling player and is extremely gifted in satirical roles and caricatures. She is also politically involved and heads "Soccorso rosso" (Red Aid), a leftist organization created to assist imprisoned political activists by providing lawyers, etc.)

I remember Strehler used to come and lend us a hand with the lights. He always came to our rehearsals—he would hide among the seats not to disturb us. It was a meaningful working relationship.

TDR: *Were you guests of the Piccolo Teatro, or were you part of it?*

Fo: Well, half and half. We were guests, but we also belonged there. We were not there as a group who had rented the theatre. Our technicians were the same as those of the Piccolo, the scenes were designed at the Piccolo Teatro school for stage designers, even the costumes were provided by the Piccolo.

Then came the parting of the ways between Parenti and myself. It occurred mainly for ideological reasons. He wanted to stage a socially inclined type of theatre, but not one as directly involved with politics as that I had in mind. In fact, eventually he ended up doing Ionesco. I could not possibly bring

myself to agree with his choices. So after the two years of our collaboration, I moved to Rome.

Actually the split was also a consequence of the great repression to which we were subjected. Guess who was "Ministro dello Spettacolo" at the time? Andreotti (a Christian Democrat, Italy's present prime minister), and then Scelba as Minister of the Interior, and then the E.T.I. (Ente Teatrale Italiano.), a residue of the Fascist regime, which it is, to some extent, even today. Repression took on the usual forms: we were boycotted, forced to move here and there, etc. Times were really bad.

In Rome I worked as a scriptwriter together with Pietrangeli, Zarattini, Age

and Scarpelli, and Pinelli, Fellini's scriptwriter. That was also a great experience. I worked also with Lizzani both as scriptwriter and codirector of *Lo svitato* (*The Screwy One*), then with Pietrangeli on other films.

TDR: *So you were still assocated with a Communist milieu?*

Fo: Yes, Pietrangeli had worked with Visconti and Rossellini from the very beginning. After a while, however, Franca and I decided to give up everything and go back to grassroots theatre.

We started again with eight farces. We worked again at the Piccolo for a whole summer when we staged *Ladri, manichini e donne nude* (*Thieves, Store-Dummies and Naked Women*). We even realized some of Franca's scripts. One was called *La comica finale* (scripts from the collection of Franca Rame's father). Some of these farces are being performed now in Milan. . . . But they have also been staged all over Europe. Many groups in Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Eastern Europe would choose one of our one-act plays and perform it together with works by Adamov, Beckett, Genet: the big names. This diffusion began right away, practically the year after we had done the pieces. They have also been performed in off-Off theatres in the States and in Canada.

Two years later we did *Gli arcangeli non giocano al flipper (Archangels Do Not Play Pinball*). It was quite a success, but censorship was still around, and, above all, Scelba was still around. He became even tougher the following year. Our satire of bureaucracy, common man, power, ministries, and the State, hit him where it hurt.

Another play *Aveva due pistole con gli occhi bianchi e neri* (*He Had Two White-and-Black-Eyed Guns*) satirized latent Fascism. It was the story of a bandit whose two-sided character was portrayed through the use of doubles, in the tradition of Greek and Roman theatre. Censorship had become just about intolerable, and we almost ended in jail for having refused to submit the text for approval by the authorities, knowing that permission could be obtained only after they mutilated the work beyond recognition.

Subsequently we did *Chi ruba un piede è fortunato in amore* (*He Who Steals a Foot is Lucky in Love*), an allegorical play which, again, hit hard upon bourgeois morality, the art of cheating, etc. It was the year of Tambroni (a Christian Democrat. His short-lived government fell as the result of what was on the verge of becoming a popular insurrection. Right after this experience, the first Center-Left government was formed: it included a number of Socialist ministers and brought about substantial democratic reforms).

TDR: *This all ended with the first Center-Left government . . .*

Fo: Right, Tambroni fell from power, and we were asked to do *Canzonissima*. (A very popular TV show. Dario Fo's and Franca Rame's participation in it was suddenly revoked before the expiration of their contract. Their performances were considered politically unacceptable. They have only recently returned to work for the state-controlled channels of the Italian TV network.) You know what happened. The trial that lasted for fourteen years just ended. The Rai-TV sued us for something like $350,000. I think we ended up by paying about $8,000.

After *Canzonissima* we were completely ostracized from the studios. We went back to the theatre with *Christoforo Colombo* and *Isabella, tre caravelle e un cacciaballe* (*Christopher Colombus; Isabel, Three Caravels and a Bullshitter*) which dealt with intellectual opportunism. *Settimo: ruba un po' meno*

(*Seventh: Steal a Little Less*), which we did afterwards, was also quite a violent critique. Censorship was finally beginning to slacken.

TDR: *It was more or less at this time, however, that you decided to break away completely from official theatrical circuits . . .*

Fo: We broke away from bourgeois theatre. And started again at the *Case del popolo* (literally: "houses of the people." Communist social and cultural centers.). There were about forty of us. We ourselves built the stage, the sound and lighting equipment, etc. We staged *L'operaio conosce trecento parole, il padrone mille. Per questo è lui il padrone* (*The Laborer Knows Three Hundred Words, the Boss One Thousand, That's Why He's the Boss*) and also two one-act plays: *Il funerale del padrone* (*The Funeral of the Boss*) and *Legami pure che tanto spacco tutto lo stesso* (*Go Ahead, Tie Me Up, I'm Going To Break Everything Anyway*). The first was a story based on an investigation of child labor and other illegal forms of employment. The other dealt with the birth of political awareness among workers who had taken over a factory that the owner had closed down.

But even the *case del popolo* were not ideal places for us. The P.C.I. did not find our performances agreeable. Pajetta and Berlinguer intervened. (Pajetta: one of the most outspoken members of the communist party. Berlinguer: present secretary of the P.C.I. and principal promoter of today's Eurocommunism.) For a while we banged our heads against the party organization, then we realized that there was nothing else to do but to withdraw.

We started all over again, in movie houses, dance halls, places where no one had ever seen a play before. For the most part we performed in small towns. In Torino we stayed only four days and each day staged a new show. Bourgeois newspapers would not review us, although, I must say, there were two notable exceptions: Monticelli and Blandi. (Theatre critics of *Il Corriere della sera* and *La stampa*, two of the largest Italian daily papers.) The P.C.I. either avoided talking about us or gave us devastating reviews. Then we rented a space, *Il capannone di via Colletta* [A warehouse type of space situated in a Colletta (Milan)] where we resumed *Mistero buffo* (*Mystery-Bouffe* by Mayakovsky), under the auspices of A.R.C.I. (Cultural association affiliated with the P.C.I.), and put together a work called *Vorrei morire anche adesso se sapessi che non è servito a niente* (*I Would Want to Die Now if I Knew that It Didn't Mean Anything*). It was a series of stories from the Resistance narrated by partisans themselves—victorious moments in the history of class struggle and the conflicts those moments created in the very men who lived them. Then we did *Morte accidentale di un anarchico* (*Accidental Death of an Anarchist*) which had an enormous success.

By then there were two groups of players: one headed by Franceschi with fifteen people and our group of twenty. But we grew even larger and had to form three companies (fifty people). We were more numerous than the company of any major Italian theatre and operated on a budget of a few thousand dollars. We all received the same amount of money: about twelve dollars a day.

We began to tour and could count everywhere on enormous audiences: at the *Palazzo dello sport*, in Milan, for instance, not to speak of outdoor performances. And all the time we were defending ourselves from aggressions and what not. We were registered as a private association and were not obliged to deposit our scripts with anyone. The police could not enter our premises; we managed to block them every time they tried. At Reggio Emilia, however, they

arrested many comrades, and since I was officially liable for all three companies, I ended up with forty indictments. So far I have won all the trials that have taken place.

During this period, Franca and I worked in *Tutti uniti tutti insieme, ma scusa, quello non è il padrone?* (*All Together, All United, But Excuse Me, Isn't This Guy The Boss?*). Then we did *Feddajn*, in which Franca Rame played with real Feddajns who spoke only in Arabic. And took up again *Pum pum qui è la polizia. Mistero buffo* had by then split into three different shows.

Unfortunately, at this point our cell divided into a majority and a minority group which could not agree on such strategic issues as political alliances with this or that organization or segment of the Movement. The gap soon turned into a feud. The majority group, with which I had not sided, seized everything, including records and books (we sell a lot of texts on class struggle, government crime and so forth). They really took everything. We were back to zero once again. To top it all off I was arrested. Franca was assaulted in a movie house in Quarto Oggiaro, a suburb of Milan. (Franca Rame was sequestered by a band of fascists who attempted to rape her and kill her. Fortuitous circumstances alone prevented a tragic ending.)

To pull us out of this situation, there arrived an invitation to perform at the French Téâtre National. We went and were received enthusiastically. Upon our return, we expropriated the Palazzina Liberty, where we have been performing ever since. Others have followed our example: some young people in need of performing space took over a deconsecrated church, etc. Even without counting the Molotov cocktails thrown at my house, the bomb at the Palazzina, the innumerable court trials that await me, I feel that during this last decade we have lived at least two hundred years.

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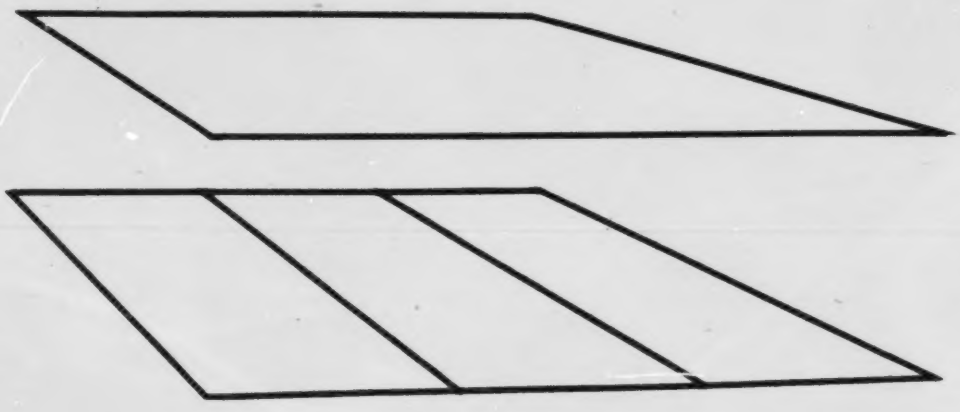
Giuliano Vasilicò's *PROUST*, with Some Antecedents

by Mario Prosperi



Giuliano Vasilicò began his theatrical career in 1968 when he returned to Italy from Sweden, where he had spent eight years studying literature and the arts, though without any specific concern for the theatre. His sister, Lucia Vasilicò, had been working in Rome as an actress in experimental theatre and films with, among others, Fellini and Warhol. With her and Ingrid Enbom, who had come with him from Sweden, he began to articulate his ideas and formulate plans for theatrical activity. He and Enbom joined Giancarlo Nanni's group as actors in the production of *Escurial* by Michel de Ghelderode. Their association with Nanni, however, lasted only a few months. Vasilicò was impatient to verify his own ability as a playwright.

He subsequently staged two of his own plays: *Psychopolitical Mission* in 1969 and *Occupation* in 1970. Both plays were autobiographical, made use of documentary material and revolved around Vasilicò as character and actor. *Psychopolitical Mission* was a story about a little girl and a maniac with the theme of deviance and crime at its center. The child, who was attracted by violence, sought her own death as a paradoxical liberation. *Occupation* was about two student couples caught in an occupied university. The basic situation in both plays could analogously be described as a tangle, labyrinth or trap. There is neither a linear structure of development nor the possibility of gratification by means of a resolution.

Vasilicò's quality as a playwright was recognized by the few critics who saw his work, but he began to feel the limitations of his own subjectivity. "I felt the need to come out of myself, to deal with something objective, something collectively recognized. A great play, for example." He chose *Hamlet* because, he said, "If I have to stage someone else's play, I want to stage the best that has been written."

The walls of the theatre were black. The set consisted only of a throne on the bare floor. Vasilicò reduced the characters to four: the student (Vasilicò), his girl friend (Enbom), his mother (Lucia Vasilicò) and his uncle (Fabio Gamma). Gamma was his chief collaborator for *Hamlet* and for successive projects, as well.

The play began with an enactment of the murder: a viscous substance was poured into the ear of the student's father (Vasilicò played the father in this scene). The student reenacted the murder several times, his excitement visibly increasing as he began to plan his own crime. The ghost was "animated" by the student, who affixed ropes to the hands of his uncle while he was asleep on the throne. He moved him as a marionette and spoke for him. This was one of many allegories that became typical of Vasilicò's style. An ideology was contained in the play: the identification between theatre and crime, as formulated by Genet. Again, the structure was a tangle in which scenes were repeated and characters were psychologically trapped in behavior patterns.

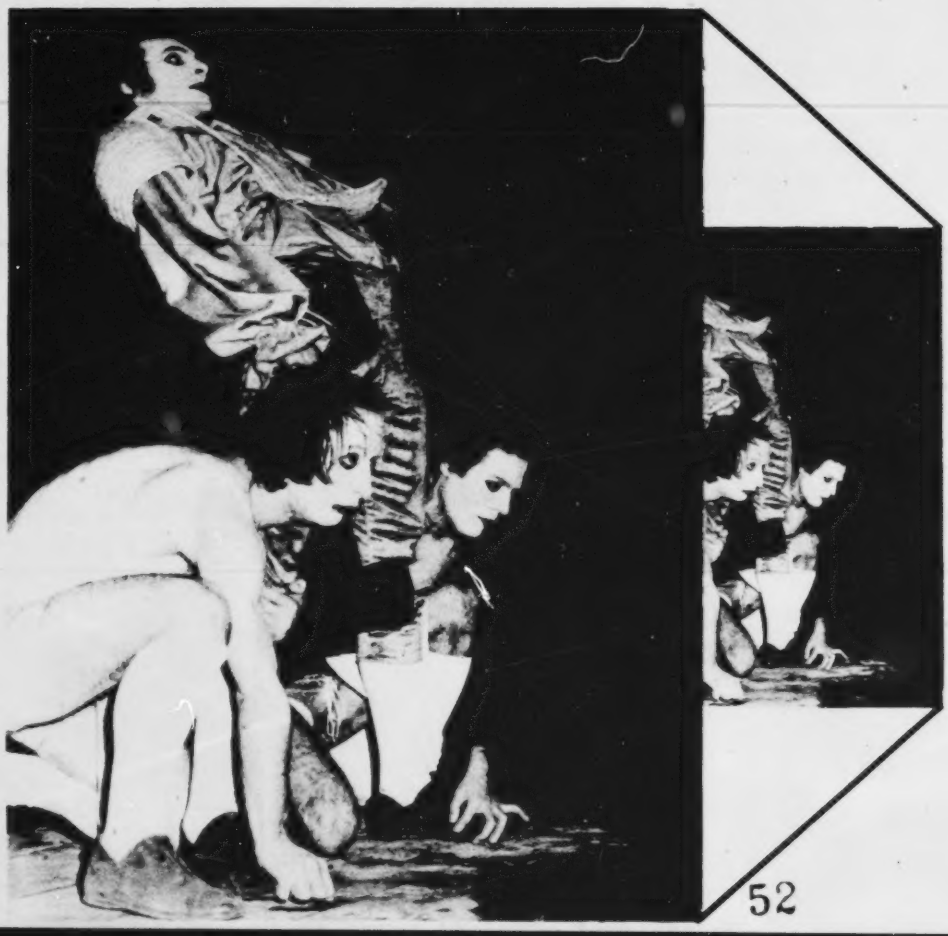
This reduction of the theme to a chain of repetitions, analogous to the dynamics of obsession, was brought to a formal rigor in Vasilicò's 1972 production of *The 120 Days of Sodom*. The play, based on the life and works of the Marquis de Sade, contained no relief, resolution or catharsis. This was the first of Vasilicò's productions in which he did not perform. "Although I was not physically on stage," he explained, "I had created all the movements in the play. They all came from my body. I performed the movements, and the actors picked them up from my demonstrations. I felt in each case that I was doing them better than anyone else. The performance was a multiplication of my own body. The image," he said, "—that proliferation of repetitive images—originated from the state of de Sade's captive body, secluded for twenty years in the Bastille."

Agostino Raff, who collaborated on the production, worked out the visual transformation of the text and composed the music. His objective was to identify and to render that which was peculiar to the imagination of de Sade, as well as to capture the more general ambience of the era in pictorial images.

Raff reflected "dense immobile air" in lighting that had a cruel persistent intensity. He designed costumes inspired by the neo-classicist art of the time: naked huntresses with golden bows, belts and leaves; marmoreal heroes carried in on moving pedestals in circular procession. He also used a historical wardrobe with tricorns, wigs and padding. The makeup gave the faces a pale, livid look; the eyes were bloodshot. "The characters," said Raff, "are bearing the stress of horrible pleasures beyond the limit of human resistance. They seem to be upset by a long funeral wake, but they are actually responding to their orgies."

The dialog was, for the most part, suppressed; only certain monologs, shouted out as heraldic announcements, were audible. The parade of human statues carried out on pedestals was alternated with a tense, electric quadrille in historical dress. The volume of the music, like the intensity of the light, was almost unbearable. The display of energy was such that the duration of the play could not exceed one hour. Neither actors nor spectators could tolerate the ceaseless tension any longer.

Formally, Vasilicò's interpretation was a sculptural work. There was no dialog or dramatic interaction. Whatever changes occurred during the course of the play took



place out of sight. The scenes were a sequence of parades, celebrations, repetitions and variations of poses. Like tableaux of a mythological saga, the neo-classical heroines appeared with the leer of arrogant whores, their noble stance shifting gradually toward the frenzy of masochistic orgasm. A young marmoreal hero was posed to resemble Michelangelo's David with an erection; his remote aristocratic expression transformed itself into a gaze of ferocious narcissism. The words, from de Sade's text, marked the progression of the heraldic parade toward carnal ecstasy and the ambiguous delineation between pleasure and death.

A "heroic" code, as in *The Balcony* by Genet, has transferred its values of ferocity and "vertu" into brothel exploits. The simplistic structure of alternating parades and quadrille movements, however, does not "represent" the change of code, as in Genet. That would constitute "dramatic" action. The change is merely alluded to by the sequence of poses and therefore "celebrated" with a sort of maniacal participation. In fact, unlike most of the Italian avant-garde, there is no caricature in Vasilicò's theatre. His images, which involve symptoms of stress and deviance, are not intended to be critical or grotesque. The figurative, sculptural rigor of the performance creates a distance between perception and meaning. Perception is unmediated; meaning is revealed only by the mind's reflection. The play depends upon its visuality and the structure of its presentation.

A similar approach to literature—that is, the attempt to create an autonomous, "autological" theatrical structure referred *by structural analogy* to the original literary source—is used in Vasilicò's most recent work, *Proust*. The production deals with the life and literature of Marcel Proust in much the same way that *The 120 Days of Sodom* dealt with the world of de Sade.

"The first operation of my mind," Vasilicò said, "is literally to plunge myself into the world of an author. I read not only his works, but whatever has been written about him, as well. I inquire about the legend an author may have left behind. The result is no longer subjective. It is what I call 'collective interpretation.'"

Working with Proust was a long process for Vasilicò. He spent two years rehearsing, recording and experimenting with ideas while looking for the organizational, structural "idea of ideas." He wanted something very simple that would allow for the next stage of development—reduction of this idea into a performance. During this period, many controversies divided the group. Agostino Raff disassociated himself from the enterprise because he felt no affinity for the world of Proust. Vasilicò felt equally alienated, but he wanted to break through his feeling, to express the investigation theatrically while maintaining a distant objectivity. He saw homosexuality as the fundamental theme, and he wanted to approach it physically with a concern for

concrete suffering, sexual solitude and the cruel fight against the emerging awareness of deviance. Lucia Vasilicò and Fabio Gamma were in favor of a more "romantic" involvement. They wanted the focus to hit wider social and cultural issues related to the crisis of the bourgeoisie. The dispute ended in a schism: Gamma remained but Lucia Vasilicò left. Ingrid Enbom, in the meantime, had joined another group. Vasilicò found new collaborators, however. Goffredo Bonanni worked as literary consultant and costume designer, Bruno Sais and Giorgio Losègo played Vasilicò's "alter egos" in every aspect of the performance.

For the first time, Vasilicò's physical approach, his method of positioning his own body as a primary medium, failed him. He did not invent the movements himself, as he had previously done. "Except one," he said. "I invented the movement that expressed repulsion. It was my repulsion to Proust." A stylistic consequence of his noninvolvement was that the tension was more narrative than muscular. Bodies moved freely, the performance was soft. The words had a basically impressionistic effect. Dialog was not "dramatic" but only thematic within the tableaux.

Vasilicò produced the play at Beat '72, the small theatre in which all of his previous works had been performed. The performing area is small, limited by walls at the left and rear. It is framed in front by a proscenium arch that is part of the structure. On the

right are two exits that lead from the performing area to an adjacent space. The forestage exit is through another arch. An actor can, therefore, exit from the main stage to the adjacent area, pass through the arch, and reappear between the proscenium and the public. This circular movement, thoroughly exploited in *The 120 Days of Sodom*, is again employed in *Proust* as a conspicuous metaphor for the psychological "viscious circle."

The walls of the theatre are black. When the light comes on, a man wearing a helmet and a cuirass over a black tailcoat is facing the rear wall. The man (Fabio Gamma) turns toward the audience and removes the helmet. Other men, similarly dressed, enter. A young boy (Proust as a child, played by Massimo Napoli) is introduced, undergoes an initiation ceremony and is accepted among the knights as a devotee to the search for the Holy Grail.

Curious, disquieting figures appear. These are pairs of people. One is carried by the other across the space in a circular movement. The faces of those being carried are wearing the impassive expressions of official portraits.

They exit, and the walls change color (a backdrop is rolled up) to brilliant white. One hears the loud sound of birds chirping. Young Proust is standing in front of the wall. He comes foreward toward the audience. He appears to be tense, as if something is bothering him. Suddenly another dyad, one person carried by the other, passes by. The boy has a physical crisis. His parents rush to help him, but he cannot be calmed.

Several symbiotic units begin to parade to the music from *The Moulin Rouge*. They represent the posters from the Universal Exhibition in Paris. A woman wearing aviator goggles, stretching her arms out, symbolizes the airplane. Another woman, entangled in a mass of electric wiring and holding a receiver and a plug, represents the telephone. A young man with bare arms holding two little wheels with rubber tires symbolizes the motor car. Another man, crowned with laurel leaves, holds up a giant electric bulb. A boy is carried out, moving his legs as if pedalling a bicycle; a man and boy, held horizontally, go through the motions of swimming.

The Moulin Rouge dissolves into the soft whispering of a conversation at a party. The men wear tailcoats and pipe hats; the women are dressed in black evening gowns and wide-brimmed hats. An elegant, authoritative woman (Mme. de Guermantes, played by Alexandra Kurczab) makes a short speech to the guests. She addresses the men, affectionately scolding them for "being sick too often."

An anemic young man appears in a tight green costume covered by a mantle of white gauze. He is wearing heavy variety-theatre makeup and sequins on his face. He struts with light, dancing steps, moving his veil like the wings of a butterfly. The messieurs are grouped together between Mme. de Guermantes and the butterfly-man.

The scenes that follow are rather realistic. They are family scenes that portray tenderness and the embarrassment of Marcel's parents by his frailty and constant illness. In their whispering, they betray morbid anxiety.

The father (Goffredo Bonanni) receives strange visits from male friends, on whose confidence he seems to rely. They come at night, whispering softly; the father greets them solicitously with apparent preoccupation. Words are exchanged, but they are unintelligible. There is no attempt to focus the attention of the spectators upon the dialog, the function of which is merely impressionistic. Throughout the play, men are portrayed as anxious, disturbed, vibrating. Women display an enigmatic, severe kind of melancholy. They are rigid and inexpressive, though occasionally they burst into staccato laughter in the company of other women.

The music of Mahler introduces a pompous ceremony, having basic funereal attributes, though the posture and expression of the characters is more self-consciously arrogant than affected. They are illuminated from the side as they descend two parallel staircases. The light frames the bodies precisely, leaving the background in darkness. The staircases are actually stepladders painted black, and so invisible to the audience. The actors climb up the back, then slowly descend the front of the ladders, entering into the narrow field of light. The verticality of their descent is not perceived as such; an effect of false perspective gives the illusion of people farther away descending a majestic staircase. When they reach the bottom, the actors parade by an imaginary corpse, then disappear to the adjacent room. Each actor climbs and descends several times, the repetition adding to the almost hallucinatory aspect of the image.

The parade is performed in a range of different attitudes and stances—from dignified poise to vain strutting—some of the actors pass with a provocative homosexual leer. Jupien and Morel (played by Bruno Sais and Giorgio Losègo) bestow on the corpse a "professional" wink.

In the following scenes, there are more parties, more visitors, and Marcel Proust is now a sensitive, troubled young man. Goffredo Bonanni, who had played his father in earlier scenes, is now in the role of Proust. The emerging character in this section is the irascible Baron de Charlus (Renzo Rinaldi). The scenes are ostensibly "dramatic" in the traditional sense. A young man (Losègo) is introduced to de Charlus, who offers him a position as his private secretary. The young man accepts, though with the proviso that he cannot serve the baron full-time. The baron becomes furious and insults the man; he is mortally offended and he leaves. Although dramatic, the scenes do not have a narrative sequence. Rather, they show a certain phenomenology of homosexual behavior in a given society. De Charlus is the leader of the homosexual group that is beginning to gravitate toward the Guermantes' "court" and to which Proust is himself attracted.

In the next scene, portraits of various members of the Proust family (actually blown-up photographs) are carried out to the performing area and hung on the walls. Young Proust is disturbed by the portraits. His presence in his home is embarrassed and surreptitious. His attitude toward his relatives in the portraits is one of simultaneous veneration and disgust.

Several of his friends come to a party. All the actors have changed roles, and they are now guests at the party. Letizia Bettini, who had been Proust's mother, is now a young woman who exhibits a peculiar intimacy with a girl friend. A man with a loudspeaker monotonously announces the names and merits of the guests as they move in and out of the room, circulating among the portraits. Late at night, the young people are left alone and sudden violence is directed against the portraits. A man drags the woman (Bettini) to the portrait of Proust's mother and commands her to spit at it. Finally, they all go off, and only the outraged portrait remains in light.

The following scene is in de Charlus' home, where the baron is beaten by the young man he had insulted. The sadistic ceremony is performed in the presence of other members of the group. Jupien, among them, is derisive. The homosexuals provoke each other to violence by insulting each other's frailty and calling each other "mademoiselle."

While watching the descriptive scenes in this section, the spectator can follow a more concealed sequence whose intention is narrative and that follows the progression of Proust toward homosexual initiation. The first stage, "angelism," is presented through an allegory. At a party, Proust appears with two white wings attached to his tailcoat. He strikes a pose (arms and legs frozen in the act of running—as if hovering in the air) and holds it several seconds. Then he rushes away, unnoticed by the guests.

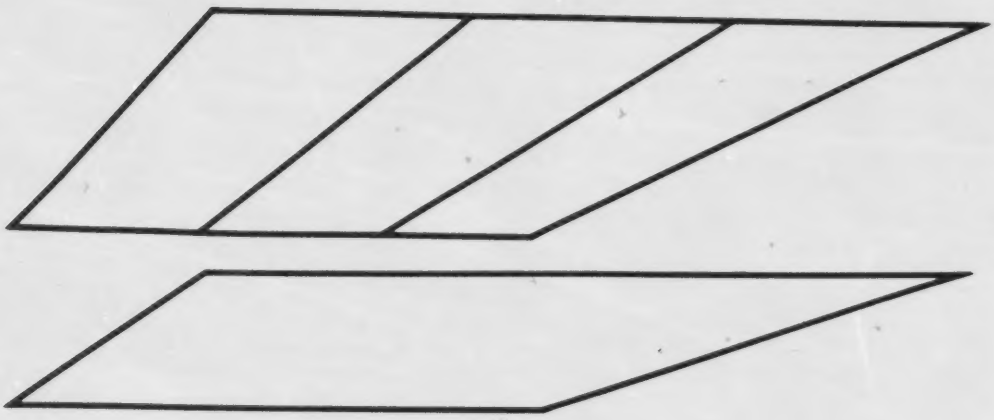
The second stage comes in "visits," similar to those received by his father. He, like his father, is solicitous. He welcomes his friends with morbid affection, anxious to confide in them his worries and suffering. He still seems to be on the periphery of the homosexual circle, lacking a clear awareness of where he is or why. Jupien is the first one to mention Proust's "mistaken sexuality"; he harshly rejects him and advises him to masturbate. Little by little, the Society of Christian Knights presented at the beginning is unmasking its reality as a society of homosexuals. The chivalrous, medieval code of the original initiation has been transformed into the code of homosexual complicity. In the next scene, the members of the group are again wearing cuirasses. During the ceremony which ensues, one of the knights approaches Proust from behind, bends him forward and ritually sodomizes him.

The next is a symbolic scene in which a "cortège" carries two long, black coffins on stage. Each coffin is held by six actors in funeral march formation. Placed vertically against the wall, the coffins appear to be staircases (again by the use of false perspective), though they actually conceal the ladder. The women in the group try to climb the stairs, but a gold heraldic bird on top of each of the staircases blocks the way. The women repeatedly attempt to escape upwards from the circle in which they live, and are repeatedly forced back into it. "They live in a pit," said Vasilicò, "once they have descended, they are in an inescapable place *où les deux sexes mourront chacun de son cote.*"

While the characters are grouped in front of the staircases, the sound of a thunderstorm is heard. A furious wind blows across the space. The characters open their umbrellas and stand rigid in the storm. The only movement is the wind against the umbrellas.

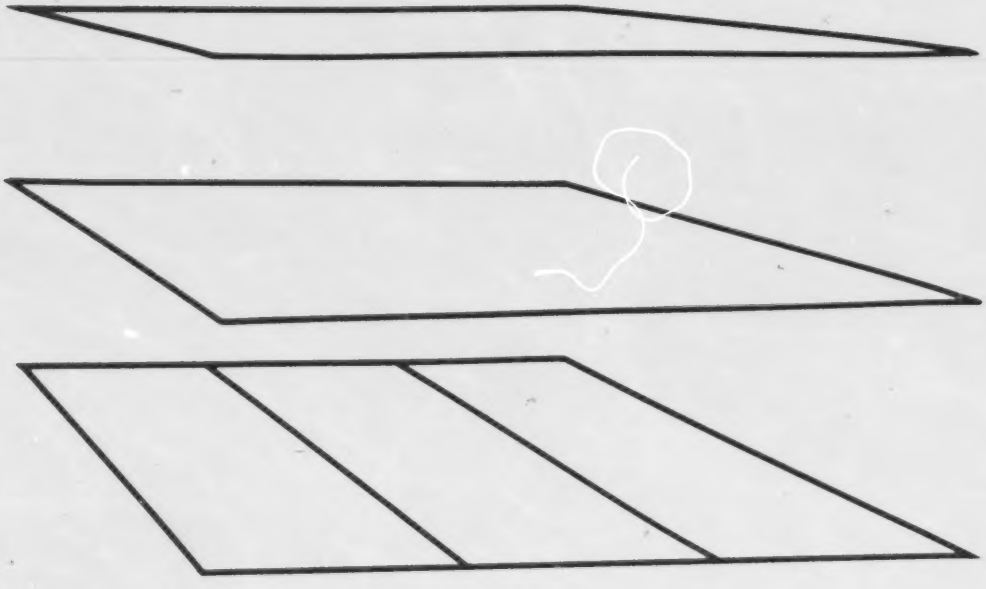
The final scene is again a circular procession: a kind of parade. Men and women are wearing cuirasses over their clothing; their faces and hair are disheveled and they stagger in a circle as if wounded, blown by the wind. The sound of wind and rain gradually changes to an organ toccata by J.S. Bach.

Mario Prosperi *teaches at the Academy of Dramatic Art in Rome. His play,* Felicitas, *is being performed at the Teatro in Trastevere.*



The Theatre of Memè Perlini

by Rino Mele



After having worked with Giancarlo Nanni as a scenographer, Memè Perlini began his career as a director in 1973 with a signal work in the history of Italian experimental theatre: *Pirandello, Chi?* (*Who's Pirandello?*). The production is based entirely on the relationship between light and objects. It does not interpret a script. On the dark stage, the actors move as though in a performance for themselves, hidden from the spectators, revealed only by flashes of light. It is a darkness full of phantoms—like the unconscious of the representation, like the deep structure from which emerges traces of violent struggle.

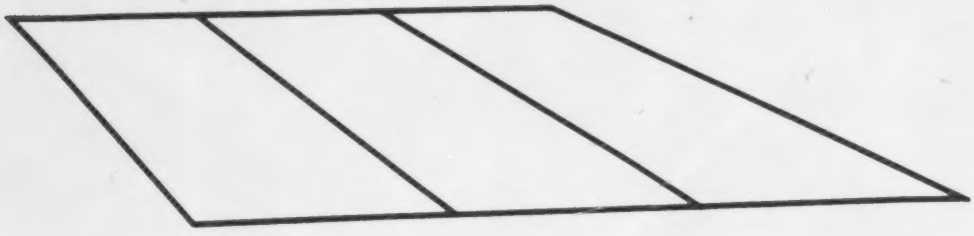
In the dark theatrical space, Perlini, from the front of the stage, works with small projectors on the magma of unknown actions. He cuts out square and rectangular pieces of light—very precise areas in which he captures details, parts of bodies, parts of objects. Moving the projectors, he follows moving figures. Light expands and contracts, goes on and off. The rectangles of light make images emerge from the darkness and tie them together. Light selects images from (and between) objects, cuts out portions of figures, articulates small details. Light creates unexpected relationships whose only bond is simultaneity or temporal succession. The light, suddenly finding an object, isolates it from its obscure context; things, characters, and theatrical objects undergo a compression—they become images. In *Pirandello, Chi?* everything is entrusted to light.

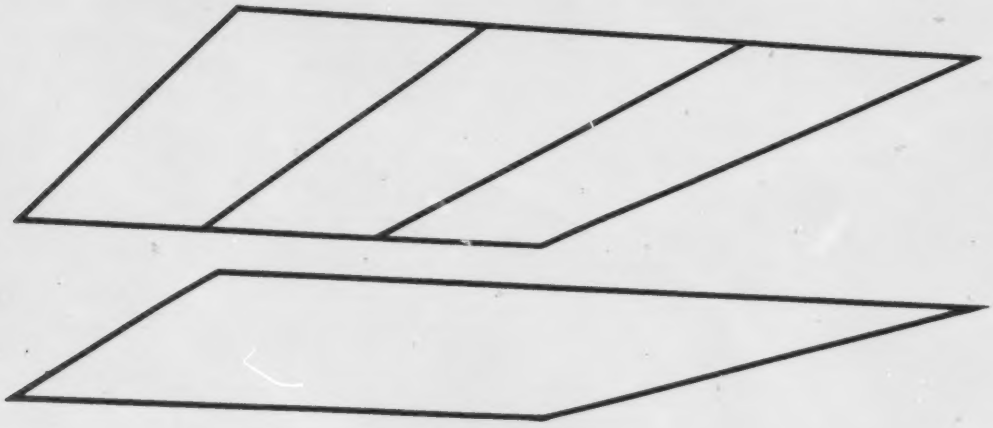
There are also fixed light sources. There are brief moments of diffused light in which one can reestablish a rapport with the whole stage. Or the stage may capsize, lit alternately in rapid succession at either side. This only proves the presence of a unitary world beyond the fragment, a world that is suddenly absorbed in darkness again.

To the fragmentary visions is added fragmentary dialog from *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore* (*Six Characters in Search of an Author*). Work was begun on that play, but it no longer exists. (However, the title, *Pirandello, Chi?*, is explained.)

There is also aggressive simultaneous musical support: a main piece by Philip Glass on which is superimposed, at times, Pink Floyd. It is a deafening musical continuum that gives the spectator a connected structure to refer to, easing the tension caused by the visual lacerations.

The operation obeys two codes: the theatrical and the filmic. A primitive kind of film is created in the theatrical space and accomplished with theatrical means for observers who are expecting theatre. In Perlini's theatrical film, the fixed lighting and the moving projectors he operates substitute for the movie camera. The actors and objects—the total space in which *Pirandello, Chi?* is performed is itself an object—are "shot" from the top, the bottom, counterlighted, and so forth. The spectator is forced to assume the suggested point of view; the changing beam of light becomes the camera's angle-shot. A character sits on a swing and swings toward the audience and away—as if zoomed by a movie camera. The rapid alternation of lights above and below the swing creates a strange vertical reverse-shot that gives a sudden depth to the entire theatrical space.

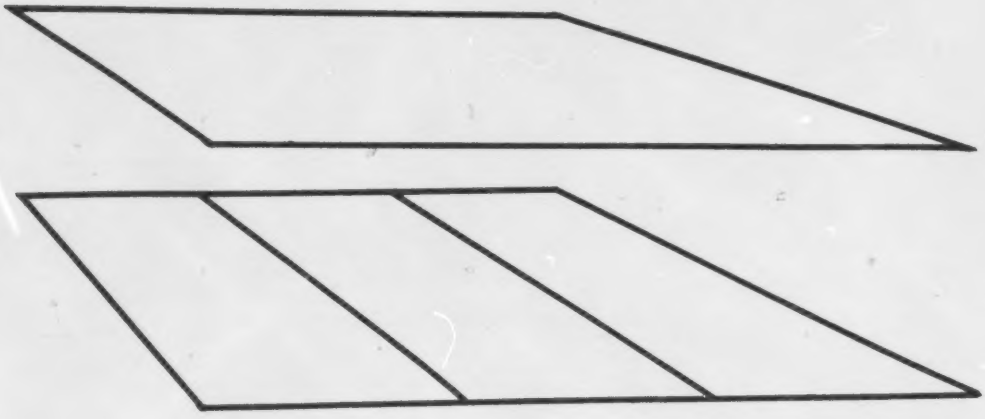




Space itself is an object to decompose. Outlines replace the concreteness of things, fragments replace the unity of objects, a multiplicity of angle-shots replaces the central perspective. This is Perlini's idea of space, and he develops it coherently in his successive works, revealing the same premises through apparently contradictory means.

In 1974, the year after *Pirandello, Chi?*, Perlini produced three works: *Tarzan*, *Candore giallo con suono dimare* (*Yellow Whiteness with the Sound of the Sea*), and *Otello*. These three pieces appear to contradict the language of his first work, but in reality they interpret and intensify it.

Tarzan is produced in two adjacent spaces: a semicircle and a rectangle tangent to it. The first is covered with a black cloth, the second by a white sheet blown by a strong wind that lifts it and fills it. Although their passage is broken by the alternation of white and black, the actors are seen completely. Yet even when the stage is well lit, Perlini uses projectors—i.e., a useless probing on walls already too well illuminated.



The two spaces alternate in containing the actions that appear to cross them, depositing the traces of distressing violence. Among the characters are a paralytic who screams in a wheelchair, two topless girls, a small black car occupied by two quarreling people that crosses the stage back and forth, an almost totally naked man whose face is covered by a lion mask, a girl with a small umbrella burning in her hands, an asexual with a dead seagull between his teeth. Bodies either struggle with each other or find serenity in absurd gymnastic exercises.

It seems that in *Tarzan* the most important change, in relation to *Pirandello, Chi?*, is a passage from the fragmentation of objects and bodies to the fragmentation of actions. There is, however, something more important: application of the fragmentation to space. The schizophrenia of vision is transferred from perception to that which is being perceived. This will be even more evident in Perlini's succeeding works.

Yellow Whiteness was staged at Pescara for two performances; it was never repeated. It starts in an enclosed theatre made of cement—bare and low, resembling a bunker. It continues on a beach and, simultaneously, on a nearby pier, on a cement strip parallel to the pier, on a wooden platform built in the sea a few yards from shore, and, finally, on another pier, farther away, that seems the spatial counterbalance of the first one.

The action is always violent, not so much for what takes place but for the violence it suggests. A rooster is beheaded. A girl circles about tied around her waist; she unwinds herself as if escaping some danger; characters wrapped in gauze move awkwardly like astronauts. Girls writhe on the beach. Actions are disconnected, and, even though they are not extracted from darkness by light, they seem to come, by chance and without design, from a dark shapeless magma.

As it was in *Tarzan*, the theme of childhood is strongly evident. Here it is entrusted to words rather than only to images. Long stories and long verbal sequences of associations and memories create a continuous sound. It is not easy to understand the text—although one hears the screams and captures a sense of anguish, of fear. Perlini lets his actors speak the dialect of Romagna; only rarely do they speak Italian. (More and more often in future productions, he will, in addition to the dialect of his childhood, use French, English, German. In *Locus Solus* Perlini even uses Latin.)

La Partenza Dell'Argonauta

With *Otello*, staged for the first time at the 1974 Venice Biennale, the first stage of Perlini's work is concluded. Its violence now seems to be diluted into a story or a group of stories that have Romagna as their locale, although they could as easily take place in any agricultural society. Perhaps one should not speak of violence but of the anguish violence engenders.

There are in *Otello*, as well, various spaces in which the staging occurs. There is an area covered with clods of earth in which there is an uprooted tree, a bed on top of which lie the long legs of a mannequin, and, farther away, an anvil and a table. On the left, there is a wooden cage with a chair inside. A door-window in the back leads to the outside. A large piece of black cloth covers one of the playing areas. At the center hang two enormous grills that swing back and forth, causing huge shadows.

A naked black man lights a candle at the end of a long pole and tries to stick it through the bars of the cage to strike the inside; a woman screams at each stroke of the pole. In the back, a door opens to a void of light. In front of the door, the two grills keep oscillating out of phase, creating gigantic shadows in square patterns that take over the entire space—but only for a moment. In the lighted emptiness, an old lady appears to yell out incomprehensible words. A fat man rails against the old lady. A naked woman lies next to a girl dressed in red.

With this production, Perlini begins a collaboration with Antonello Aglioti, a visual artist. Perlini now incorporates color in his inward-directed theatre, opening it toward

the outside. Aglioti stands at the edge of the space using an overhead projector. The projector enlarges the colors drawn on its translucent surface and projects them on the walls and on the actors. Color appears to enhance the actions, but it is easily erased and disappears again.

The cage hit with the pole, the swinging of the grills, the voice of the old woman, the projected colors: each of the images seems to solicit the others. The screams of

the fat man blend with the cries of the woman, which become louder while the shadows expand and become threatening. Suddenly there is darkness and silence, followed by the soft and distant sound of horses' hooves. The concept of nullification is very important in *Otello*. Throughout, there is a continuous falling back to darkness, the use of curtains that hide, the cancellation of characters and objects by the overhead projector.

In 1975 Perlini produced one work, staged, but never completely presented, at Chieti. For *Paesaggio N. 5 (Landscape Number 5)* he used the entire slope of a valley that extends into a meadow. The spectators sit at a long table that crosses the meadow.

There is a build-up of unrelated actions. Nuns ride bicycles downhill. A bride approaches, wrapped in veils. A group of men dressed as brides sit at a table farther away. A bride climbing a tree, a woman with an armful of flowers, a barechested youth clinging to a pole up in the air are posed, unmoving characters. Pieces of sentences are repeated; the furious iteration of words focus the attention on one figure and then another, moving it like a piece on a chess board.

The space of the valley seems to be coherent. In reality, it is continuously broken. The greenery and softness of the slope are not enough to unify the fragmentary actions. *Landscape Number 5* is another example of how the fragmentation of objects in Perlini's work has become fragmentation of theatrical space.

The performance is never finished: spectators, some of them students, invade the playing area, yelling, "Perlini, Perlini, la terra ai contadini!" ("Perlini, Perlini, to the farmers the land!").

Locus Solus of 1976 was adapted from the novel by Raymond Roussel. Set in a barren rectangular stage space its floor covered at times with sand, it is again a journey through a past (childhood) and a plunge into an ancient agricultural society that is always allaying its fears by attacking a single person, the most defenseless one. Again it is filled with violent images: three girls who aggressively stride after each other miming a sexual quarrel, a girl possessed by a sort of ferociously obscene dance, the whipping of the floor as if a body was being whipped. But here there is always a single character who finds himself facing all the others—assassins, executioners, the representatives of a crazy tribe. The choral or the tribal moment contrasts with the individual one in an obsessive, repetitive way. In one long section, for example, a long line of actors walks back and forth across the width of the stage; during each passage, a single actor remains behind, alone, and indulges in idiosyncratic and compulsive acts—scratching his hand, wrapping his head in a veil, etc. At the end of the play, the stage is empty. There is only a small wooden model of the setting itself. Perlini, sitting at his control board in front of the audience, throws stones at the model.

In *La Partenza dell'Argonauta (The Departure of the Argonauts)*, also in 1976, Perlini is tempted by the big show, the spectacle, rather than the representation. To totally autonomous music by Panni, he juxtaposes vivid colors, costumes, a particular use of lighting, and complicated and strange props: hollow rotating columns in which cellists are hidden, a rolling sphere, chairs used as crutches, a huge mask that descends from the ceiling, horses, small beds floating in the air, enormous *papier-mâché* statues that close the proscenium opening only to be "erased" by square patterns thrown by the overhead projector. Perlini has found his childhood love: "My first rapport was with the circus, not theatre," he says.

In *Tradimenti N. 1 (Treacheries No. 1)*, at an elementary school in Montepulciano, Perlini uses the entire building as a scenic machine, creating a container of strange passageways and disorienting spaces—more like a game of hide-and-seek than a game of chess. The spectator moves through the building with the hesitation of the searcher who is "it," afraid to make the wrong move.

On the ground floor, the dining room is ready for supper, but the dishes are empty. A cellist sits in a chair on a table; in front of him, another chair hangs in the air. In one of the classrooms, the desks, the small chairs, and the teacher's desk all hang suspended, tied with many cords. In another long and narrow classroom, wooden planks six feet above the floor support a series of short plants such as cypresses, creating a false perspective toward the window; there, as if drawn on the sky, is (suggested by a Magritte painting) the outline of a cellist. Musical pieces become superimposed and follow each other like memories without sense from classroom to classroom.

One of the frequently used elements is string, cord, ropes. It suspends objects, holds them together, relates them to one another, indicates itineraries, sets limits. Another ever-present element is a tightly woven metallic net. It is used to mask and obscure things, like a filter. One finds it in front of a classroom door or along the floor of a hallway with a body squirming under it. It is used to cover classroom windows that face the schoolyard where some actors are rehearsing a traditional play. The whole building seems to be inside out.

Translated by Nella Carravetta

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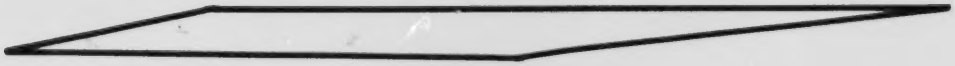


Group Altro's *ICS*

by

Denise Applin

Altro was founded in 1972 in Rome by Achille Perilli, an artist, with the two fundamental and complementary ideas of collective work and intercode creation. Perilli, who originally worked as an artistic collaborator with only one actor, was subsequently joined by Lucia LaTour, an architect who does most of the choreography; Walter Branchi, a composer; and Bruno Magno, a photographer and lighting technician. Luciano Martinis and Gianni Trozzi have been working with the group from the beginning.

The idea of intercode creation has often extended beyond theatrical performance to workshop activities, political seminars, photographic exhibitions, concert series, and a lecture on linguistics. Of nine projects to date, only five have been performances; and some of those performances have included related "side shows."

Altro has learned many of its techniques from the historical avant-garde; its most decided influences having been the Futurists, Dadaists and the Bauhaus school. *Merz* (1973–74), one of their earliest projects, was a characteristically intercode performance/exhibition that integrated the music, poetry, paintings and graphic designs of Kurt Schwitters. Altro also adapted some of his writings into mime and puppet theatre. "Why Kurt Schwitters?" The program reads:

> *certainly not for reasons of Dada archeology. On the contrary: because Schwitters is a growth point in European culture, and we are interested in emphasizing some components of his work which we consider important as a background to our work. Among these components, the operation which we call intercode can immediately be seen.*

The intercode principle, on which so much of Altro's work is based, is accomplished in diverse ways. It can be more than the aggregation of different art forms into a multi-faceted "show"; very often the forms do not remain distinct, but enter into a sort of catalysis whereby dance may become music by attaching piano wire to the body, mathematical symbols may be "translated" into visual art.

The title of a later performance, *Zaum* (1976), refers to a "transmental" language developed by the Russian Futurists Klebnekov and Kruchenyek. Language and the investigation of its symbols and uses are a part of almost every Altro project. In *Zaum*, there is also the influence of Raymond Roussel, in the use of "quotations" from *Locus Solus* and *Impressions d'Afrique*. Altro's work is rarely surrealistic, though; even here, the scenes were less meaning-oriented than "effects" in the use of color and texture.

Like their historical precursors, Altro works on an almost exclusively formalistic principle. Themes, by the broadest definition of the word, have been used (in *Merz*, for example), but used only to unify certain formal entities. Nor is theme to be confused with meaning: there are several elements that recur in every one of Altro's projects—language, physical space, behavior—but they are treated without conclusions, without consigning a particular meaning to them. The theme of *Merz* is, quite simply, Schwitters. In subsequent spectacles (*Experiments* [1974–75], *Zaum* [1976], *ICS* [1977]), one can see the progressive loss of an overriding theme. The unity is in the form itself. It comes from within the work and holds itself together with the technical consistency of Altro's method.

ICS is Altro's most recent performance. The three letters in the title do not refer to anything. The subtitle is: "Theatrical Form's Unknown Quantity." In the process of its

having been conceived, worked out and performed, it was intentionally wiped clean of intentionality, reduced to its formal essentials. When *ICS* was in rehearsal, Perilli described it as a gamut of "tastes" of the various kinds of work in which Altro had heretofore been involved. *ICS* did, in fact, quote liberally from previous performances, though it was in many ways less flashy. There was a minimum of objects and "machinery" in use; the actors played both animate and inanimate roles.

In accordance with their usual work method, the "gestures" and "effects" are conceived by the principle members, then developed by all the participants. There is absolutely no improvisation or chance element in any of the final performances. Every action is timed in rehearsal and charted on several of the large graphs that cover the walls. There is a different graph for each aspect of the spectacle: one charts the action and its repetitions; another, the actor and his appearances on stage; another covers time segments--what everyone is doing and where he is standing at any particular time. Words and phonemes that had been originally chosen at random are listed in the exact order in which they will be used so that they are no longer random by the time they are spoken.

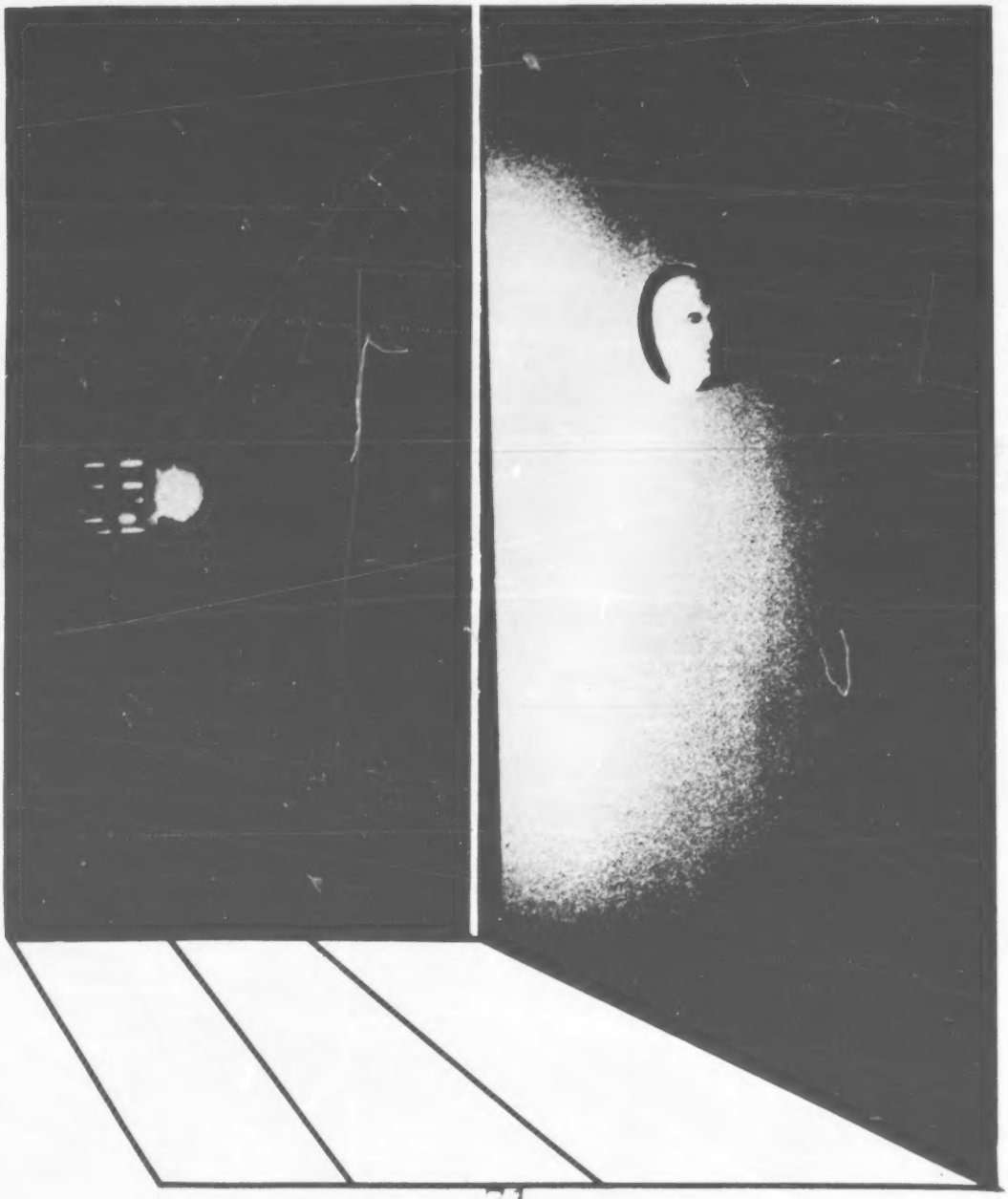
The actual space in the Altro theatre is minimal. It is divided into four boxcar rooms: the spectators and the actors share the first room and an arch leads into the second, where most of the performance takes place. Another arch delineates a small third room, that is raised by two steps. In this third room are the exits (one on each side) and the back wall on which lighting effects are done. The fourth room is invisible to the audience; it is from here that the actors enter the playing area. The entire theatre is painted white, except for the back wall of the third room that is black.

The theatre space is very small, but Altro has been able to achieve some remarkable effects, often in spite of physical limitations, often because of them. By performing in a concentrated area, shadows can be thrown without being lost. In *Zaum*, a dancer was affixed by hundreds of wires to all four corners of the second room. Altro is known for these kinds of effects, that are ingeniously contrived. They create their machinery out of bodies, optical illusion and lights. In one production, they created the illusion of automatic writing by taping over symbols on the back of a transparent screen, then lifting the tapes slowly so that the action resembled the act of writing.

The music throughout the performance is a tape of Walter Branchi on prepared piano. The music is erratic and it is often cut in the middle of a gesture or dance, then continued as abruptly.

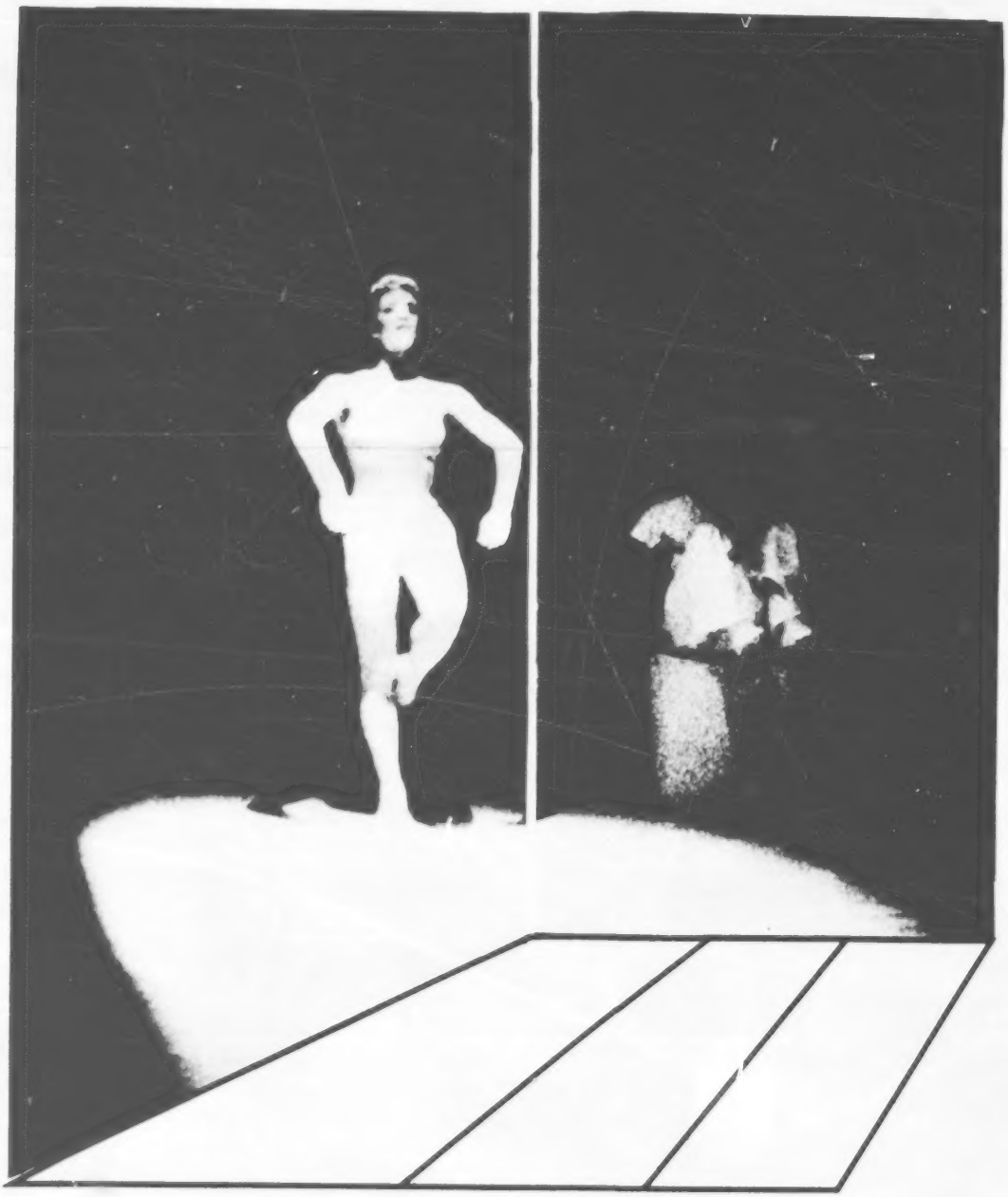
A strictly sequential account of *ICS* would be difficult to give, owing to the repetition of actions and split-stage structure. In any case, the sequence, though adhered to, is not necessary to the development. It begins with an operation that involves the positioning and repositioning of a large screen by three actors. Some of their moves are visible; others are executed in darkness, then revealed in light.

A plank appears on stage, a head-hole near the top covered with a sheet of rubber. An actress, who is behind the plank and cannot be seen, manipulates the rubber with her fist, then moves off. (She appears four more times during the course of the



performance, repeating the action with variations. She gradually "peels" layers from her face: first the rubber, then patches from her mouth and eyes and, eventually, the white mask over her head. She "animates" the different parts of her face like the Tin Man in *The Wizard of Oz*.)

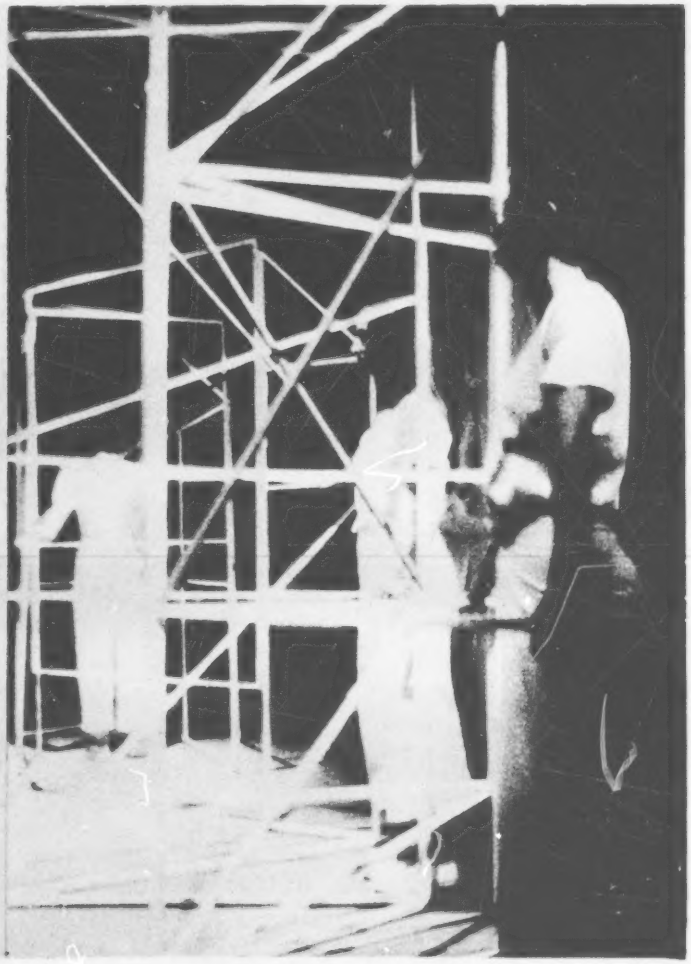
Two dancers in white, who have been seated on cubes in the playing area since the audience came in, start a robot-like "dance" or movement from positions diagonal to one another. The movement has a steady, monotonous rhythm at first, then the rigidity of it begins to dissipate, and they lose the synchronization. As the movement



becomes less exact, it becomes more energetic or entropied. They accompany the gesture with "words" (sduf pli out chat terre cloche) at one point, then they return to their cubes. (This is repeated between and during parts of the following gestures.)

A ballerina in tights enters, executes a dance, then exits.

A tube of light appears on the back wall; lengthening, contracting and gyrating.



Then three arrows are shot at the side wall by an unseen archer.

An actor enters and announces a lecture on the division of the space. He uses a portable lighting console with which to "punch out" various effects. (The effects are actually being controlled by another machine offstage.) His demonstration begins to fail, and he can no longer keep in synch with the lights that flash on and off in ostensibly random patterns in defiance to his machine. He grabs his console and leaves the space.

Next, there is a series of effects on the back wall. Phosphorescent sheets of paper fall from slits, then a white tube comes out of the wall and unfolds itself into a mobile geometric sculpture. The object changes shape as it distends, contracts and spins in front of the black wall. Then it collapses into its original tubular shape and is sucked back in like a drinking straw.

The lecturer returns for Part Two of the lecture on the division of the space. In previous productions, Altro has used various means by which to draw attention to the physical aspects and limitations of the space in which they work. In *Gesto*, the spectators examine the environment themselves by passing among objects and photographs. In *Zaum*, an "explorer" executes trigonometric measurements of the

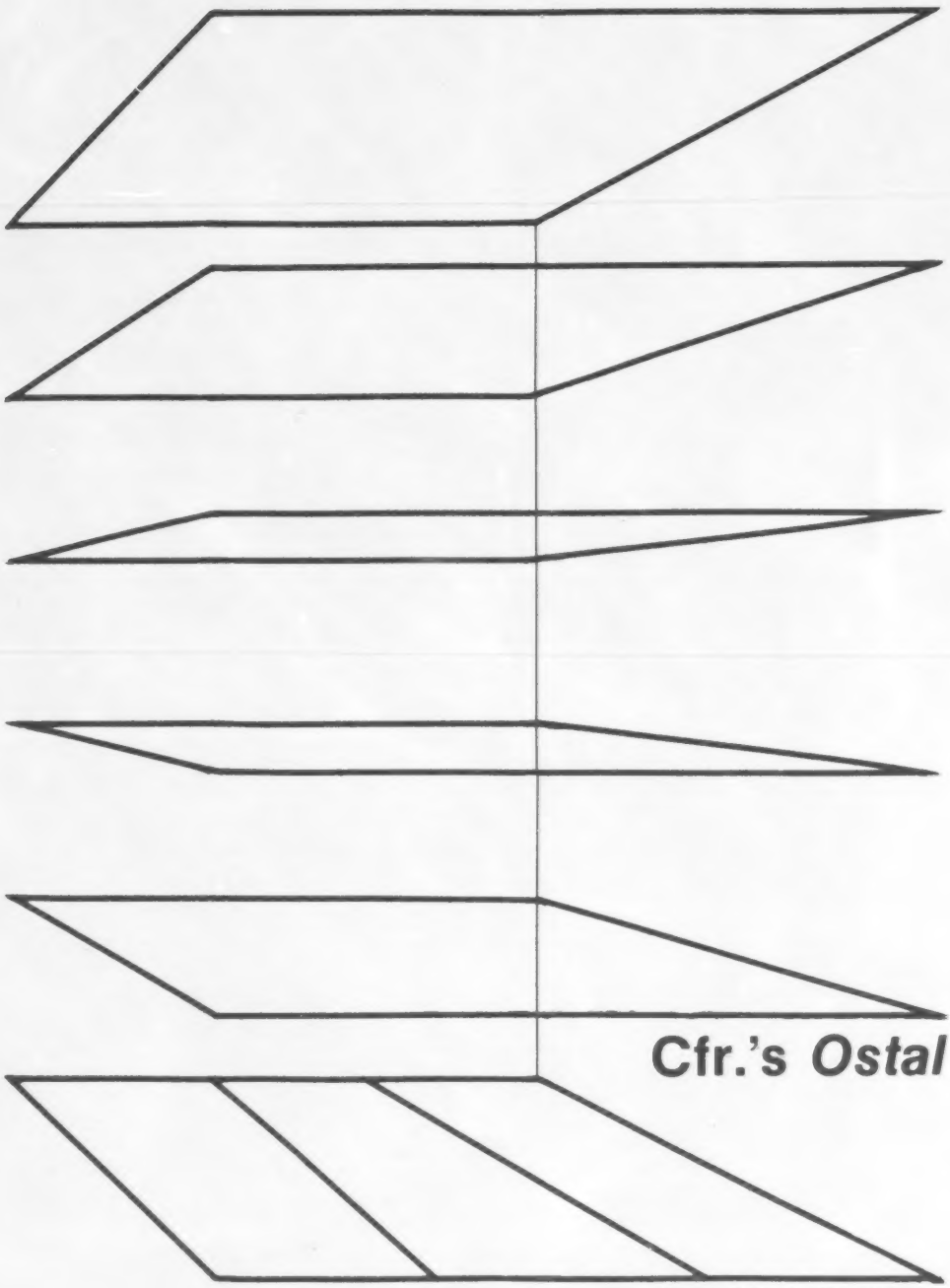
area, then records the results on a blackboard. In *ICS*, the gesture is rather like a caricature of Altro's own preoccupation with spatial perspective. This section contains the only coherent speech in the performance: a comic monolog by the lecturer.

The lecturer uses slides of different line formations (horizontal and vertical stripes, checks, etc.) resembling blowups of fabric swatches. He explains how the "visual aids" help one's understanding of the physical space. Lines represent the arches or the steps; a missing slide represents the whiteness of the walls. He runs through a routine of Chaplinesque sight gags, stepping on lines as they fall off the projection screen, racing around the space pointing out obscure angles of the theatre as examples of what is shown on the slide. He confuses horizontal with vertical, and when someone points out his error, he attempts to lift the slide off the screen and turn it around into place.

Finally, he leaves the space, still muttering, and another screen is moved out. It is a huge white sheet with protuberances of the same material "animated" or worked from behind. The pouches and geometric designs inflate and deflate while the movement of the two white dancers is heard from behind the screen.

The ballerina reenters and repeats her dance four more times, each one behind a different screen. The first is clear plastic with white light behind. The second is a white sheet illuminated by red, white and green lights that create an extraordinary color/shadow effect. The third is a glass screen divided down the middle into transparent and translucent sides. The dancer's body is visible on the left, her shadow on the right. The fourth screen is a sheet of rubber with white light behind. The shadows change size and sharpness with the dimming or intensifying of the light. The dance is then completed without rear lighting; the dancer performs against the screen, modelling a mobile sculpture with her body.

There is a final series of effects on the back wall. From apertures fall a stream of clear crumpled plastic, excelsior, small white balls and tissue paper.



by Uzi Parnes

Ostal, the home environment as a workshop in madness, is a series of performance pieces produced by the Italian experimental group Cfr., directed by Aldo Rostagno. *Ostal* was performed by the group in New York for two weeks in April 1977.

Ostal [pr.: oo-stou'(t)] is a word of Languedocien, the dialectal variant of Old Provencal spoken in Southern France west of the Rhone. Ostal meant house, when the house was abode and temple at the same time, a sacred place where life was celebrated as a ritual—as opposed to the home of present days, a jungle of electrical appliances in which we cultivate our private neurosis.

The Cfr. (short for confrontation) was founded by Rostagno in 1975, after leaving the U.S. and returning to his native Italy. His change in life style as well as the growing dependence on the family, that Rostagno feels is part of the aging process, are what prompted Rostagno to concentrate his research on the home environment. "Man

creates his environment and gradually his environment conditions him." Because of this sentiment Rostagno does all his research within the wooden cell in which the play was presented. The particular group he is working with has been together for about five months. They conduct seminars in Levi-Strauss and Hall and do various psychophysical work with the body, "just because we can't jump or do somersaults with the mind." The group studies everyday occurrences that take place in the home. They isolate relationships, gestures and attitudes and attempt to transform these into rituals. The groups Rostagno works with do not, generally, stay together very long. The intensity of the work they do leaves no room in their lives for anything else. "People get sick working with me," he claims, "They usually leave me." He describes the work as being "centered around the 'home environment.' Using a methodology derived from structural anthropology, the group studies the interactions between man and environment (territoriality, kinesics, proxemics), in an attempt to decode domestic objects into significant morphemes."

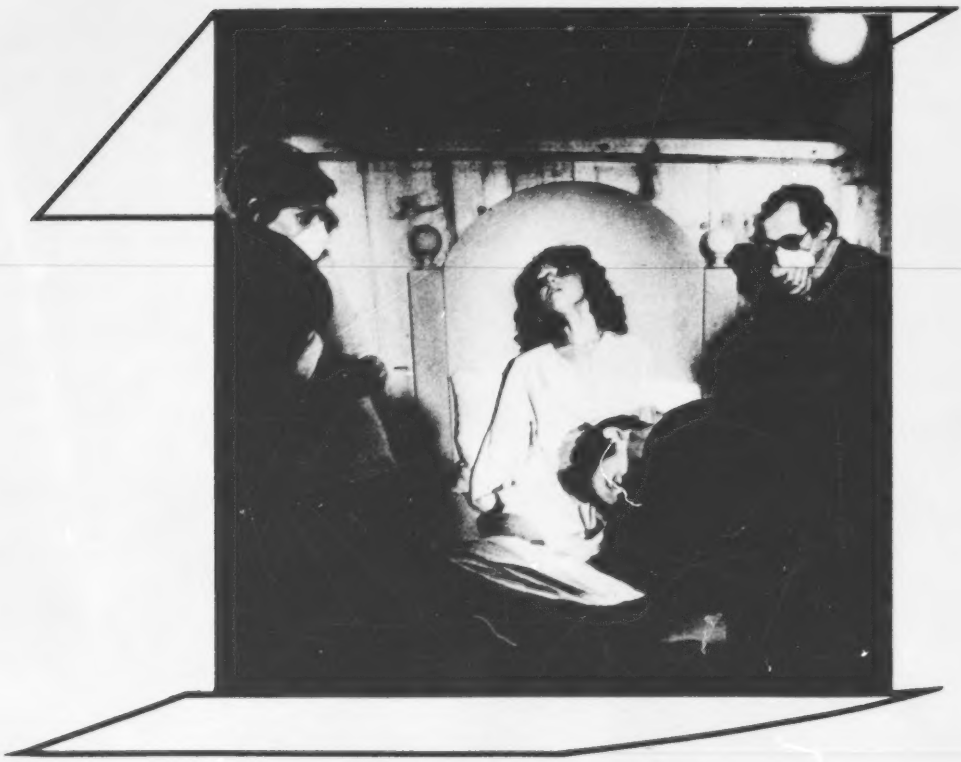
Ostal (bed) is a visible result of the group's research. Rostagno does not directly care about theatre. He does, however, feel a need to present the material accumulated through the research the group does. Theatre is only a means of expression. The piece itself was put together in two weeks. The performance seen in New York differed somewhat from the original production in Florence. The cast originally consisted of two men and two women. One of the actors left the group before their New York appearance and they were forced to rework it. The group encountered more difficulties in New York. The performance was originally scheduled for a two-week engagement at La Mama. However, it was deemed pornographic and their engagement was cancelled. With some help from the New York theatre community, the group was able to find an alternate performance space.

Spectators were limited to twenty people per night. Each spectator was assigned a number. People who came together were assigned nonconsecutive numbers. Specta-

tors were told to remove shoes and coats and were not allowed to enter the performance space until their numbers were called. Once called, they were conducted one by one or in pairs into a non-illuminated space. There they were pulled through the darkness by a large hand wearing a rubber glove. The journey lasted from fifteen seconds to a minute, although the darkness made it seem longer. They were directed toward a dim light emanating through a door. At the door, one could see the hand belonged to a bearded man wearing a white doctor's smock. He placed a surgical mask smelling of ether over each spectator's mouth and nose and pushed them into the *Ostal* environment.

The environment consisted of a room about fifteen feet long whose walls and ceiling were at a slant. The end containing the door was about six feet wide and seven and a half feet high. The other end was about four feet wide and six feet high. The

room was constructed of raw lumber. The walls were bare with the exception of a square foot of lace near the ceiling toward the rear of the wall to the left of the door. The facing wall contained a porthole that closed by means of a hinged wooden shutter, about nine inches square. The porthole opened and closed throughout the performance. The ceiling contained an opening as well, located near the center. It closed by means of a removable shutter about twelve by thirty inches. It was constructed of slats and allowed air to come in. It, too, was removed and replaced repeatedly throughout the performance. The room was illuminated by one bare light bulb hanging about a foot from the ceiling toward the rear of the space. Filling most of the space was a large bed about twelve feet long and running parallel to the walls with about eight inches of standing room between the walls and the bed. The bed was about three feet off the ground and had a pink headboard at its narrower end. A green bedspread covered most of the bed. It was folded over about two feet from the edge of



the headboard exposing white sheets. In the bed a young woman lay motionless. She was dressed in white bedclothes, her back resting on a white pillow against the headboard. To her left, the spectators' right, sat a woman in black leotards. She too was motionless. The expression on both their faces was blank.

Once inside, the spectators were directed either to stand by, or sit on, the bed. When all twenty spectators were in their places, the door was locked and barred from the outside.

The two women remained motionless for a few moments. Then the woman in black rose and began straightening the bed linen at an extremely rapid pace. She repeated this six or seven times, bending the other woman, the patient, forward each time and fluffing the pillow. Her gestures were mechanized. Neither woman expressed any emotion. The woman in black returned to her seat. Suddenly, and still expressionless, the patient moved her right arm briskly in a sweeping motion, hitting the other woman's face. The woman in black reached for her cheek. Her face now expressed terror and hate. She rose slowly and proceeded to back away from the patient at an extremely slow pace. As she walked away, the patient swept her arm again, this time hitting the wall. As the woman in black neared the door, it opened and she backed out. The door was relocked and the light went out.

A dim light appeared. Through the porthole in the right wall, a rigid open-fisted hand appeared. It went back out through the porthole. By means of a flashlight, the image of a face could be seen reflected in a mirror. The porthole closed and through the slats in the ceiling shutter, the sound of whispering could be heard. The patient moved slowly toward the sound, reaching with her arms. Her face, expressing emotion for the first time, looked desperate. As she reached the source of the sound, she collapsed on the bed. Blackout.

The room remained dark. A conversation was heard outside the right wall. A man and a woman spoke in Italian. Dishes rattled. Their voices got softer moving around the space, finally disappearing.

The light reappeared. The ceiling shutter was missing. Through the opening, the head and chest of the woman in black descended. The patient moved toward her. She reached for the other woman's mouth. The woman in black spit in the patient's hand. The patient returned to her resting position and sensually put the other woman's spit in her own mouth. With her other hand she fondled her own breast. The woman in black descended further and sat on the bed. For a moment the two women touched one another sensually. While they were touching, the head and bare chest of a man descended through the opening. The patient's face expressed terror. The women parted and the woman in black took hold of the man's arms and was lifted up by him. Blackout.

Outside the room a music box played a lullaby. Through a crack in the ceiling, a dim light shone. The patient sat with her head in her lap. She rose slowly and moved toward the spectators, weaving through them and embracing each one. Simultaneously, the head of the woman in black could be seen moving repeatedly by the open porthole. The movement rose and fell following a curve first to the left, then to the right. The head reappeared about every thirty seconds, whispering a different name each time it passed the opening. The patient returned to the head of the bed. She moved her pillow under the crack through which the light was shining. She moved about the edge of the bed as though searching frantically. She stopped and turned to face the spectators with her hands cupped. She placed her hands on the pillow and removed them, exposing a small painted mechanical bird which moved about the

illuminated area on the pillow. Suddenly she cringed and fell on the bird covering it with her body. Blackout.

A siren was blowing outside the room. The light came on. The patient was resting against the headboard with her hands over her eyes. A bare arm descended slowly through the opening in the ceiling. It hung motionless. Another arm appeared. Outside the sound of recorded chants was playing. The patient moved toward the arms that had joined hands. The patient rested her head on the hanging hands as though in a noose. The hands parted, letting the patient fall. Blackout.

The light returned. The patient was once more against the headboard. Sitting beside her in a long black robe was the woman in black. She spread the patient's legs apart and removed a gauze bandage from the patient's vagina. She pulled a few feet of bandage and rolled them up, continuing this for several minutes. She stopped and showed the patient the small cross-shaped doll she had made from the bandage. The patient reached for the doll. The woman in black did not relinquish it. They fought,

falling first to one side, then to the other. The patient grabbed the doll. The two women embraced briefly. Blackout.

A dim light appeared. The patient, at the head of the bed, rubbed and scratched herself maniacally. Occasionally she stopped to suck on her bedclothes or put her fingers in her mouth and attempted to pull something out, looking horrified. After several minutes she stopped and moved gradually toward the spectators, making vomiting sounds and appearing to vomit on the spectators. Intermittently she stopped and embraced individual people. After she had gone around the bed, she returned to her place. The light faded out.

A dim light appeared. The man in the white coat, who had been standing near the door, gestured to the spectators to clear the bed. A naked man and woman descended from the opening in the ceiling. The patient moved toward them. The man and woman tumbled and somersaulted over each other. The patient touched them one at a time. The couple seemed to be making love. The three continued interacting for several

minutes. The light grew brighter. The man rose to his knees while the woman stretched out with her head in his lap. Red streaks could be seen all over their bodies. The patient was holding a red crayon in her hand. She rubbed it across the man's face. Blackout.

The dim light of a flashlight came through the slats in the shutter. The light moved back and forth, sometimes leaving the room in darkness. The patient rose and walked around the edge of the bed, placing her hands and body against the walls of the room. The spectators were forced to get out of her way. She walked the entire edge of the bed, seemingly climbing the walls. She returned to her place. The light vanished.

The light bulb went on and off rapidly. The patient sat in bed shaking. Through the open porthole a hand holding a soup bowl emerged. Another hand appeared holding a soup spoon. The spoon dropped loudly into the bowl. The patient moved, shaking, toward the source of light. The hands disappeared, taking the bowl. The light stayed off.

A dim light shining through a crack in the ceiling illuminated the piece of lace on the rear left wall. The patient moved toward the light. She forced the spectator standing in front of the lace out of the way. Slowly she began tearing the lace off the wall. She removed the lace exposing a piece of gauze roughly the same size. She removed the layer of gauze revealing another behind it. She removed the second layer of gauze revealing a third layer covering a photograph. As she removed the last layer of gauze, the photograph could be seen. It was the face of the patient. Blackout.

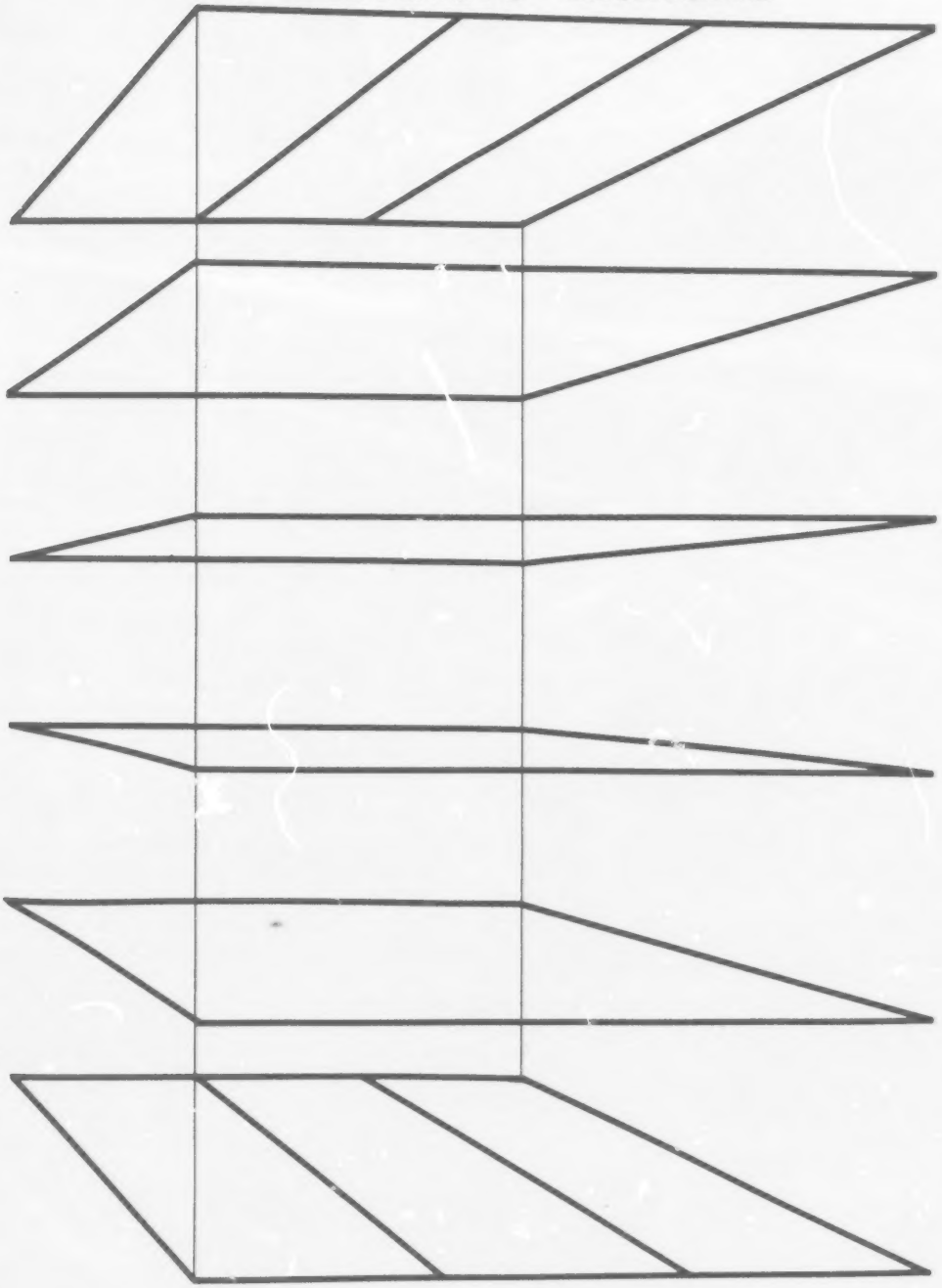
The room was dark, the porthole open. The man in the white coat pushed as many people as possible toward the opening. The space outside was illuminated by means

of a dim red lightbulb, hanging directly over a table. The table was about fifteen feet from the opening and placed parallel to the wall of the room. The table was covered with a cloth and set with dishes. A naked woman was lying on it. The woman remained motionless for several minutes. Then she began rolling very slowly toward the edge of the table nearer the room. When she reached the edge she fell to the floor, knocking down some of the dishes on the table. She got up, and with a terrified expression on her face, ran toward the porthole, slamming it shut in the spectators' faces.

A dim light shone through a crack in the ceiling toward the rear of the room. The patient sat on the bed, her legs folded under. She held a bunch of string in her hand that she unwound. When she had enough she placed one end of the string on a hook on the left wall near the ceiling. She continued unwinding it and placed the other end on a hook on the right. She then slowly removed her nightgown and hung it on the string at the center, blocking some of the spectators' vision. Next she removed her slip and hung it on the string beside her gown. She was now bare breasted and proceeded to remove her underpants, which she hung on the string as well. The clothes on the string formed a curtain which removed most of her from sight. She returned to her sitting position. The light went out. When it reappeared the patient had vanished. The door to the room had been opened and the spectators were gestured to leave.

Uzi Parnes *produces performance art in New York City.*

Spazio Zero's
To Salvatore Giuliano



by Nicola Garrone

Lisi and Silvana Natoli founded the group Spazio Zero in 1973. Their work focuses on certain ethnic and historical aspects of Sicily, Sicily being, for them, a microcosm of the Third World. The title of their most recent production, *To Salvatore Giuliano*, is a dedication to a famous Sicilian criminal. Giuliano began as a rebel, then became the emblem of the revolt of the poor in southern Italy. The American invasion and the collapse of state authority after Italy's defeat in the second World War turned him toward politics. He championed an attempt at secession from Italy, masterminded by the Mafia, who expected to profit by Sicilian independence. The attempt failed, but Giuliano remained linked to the Mafia and was subsequently hired by them to massacre striking farm workers in Portella della Ginestra. The story is treated as a popular myth by Spazio Zero. They use traditional storytelling, ethnic music, religious ceremony and Sicilian puppets in the performance.

The Performance Begins

The stage is dark and the music of a rural band is heard. From the back of the stage, Salvatore Giuliano enters wearing a long white raincoat and a scarf around his neck. He is dressed exactly as he appeared on the front pages of all of the newspapers in Italy. He holds a candle up to the image of an unidentifiable man. The band enters on stilts and files in procession to the center of the stage. The bandleader announces the beginning of the performance to the audience. Like Buffalo Bill, who used to tell the story of his legendary life in his Wild West Show, Giuliano himself is the show.

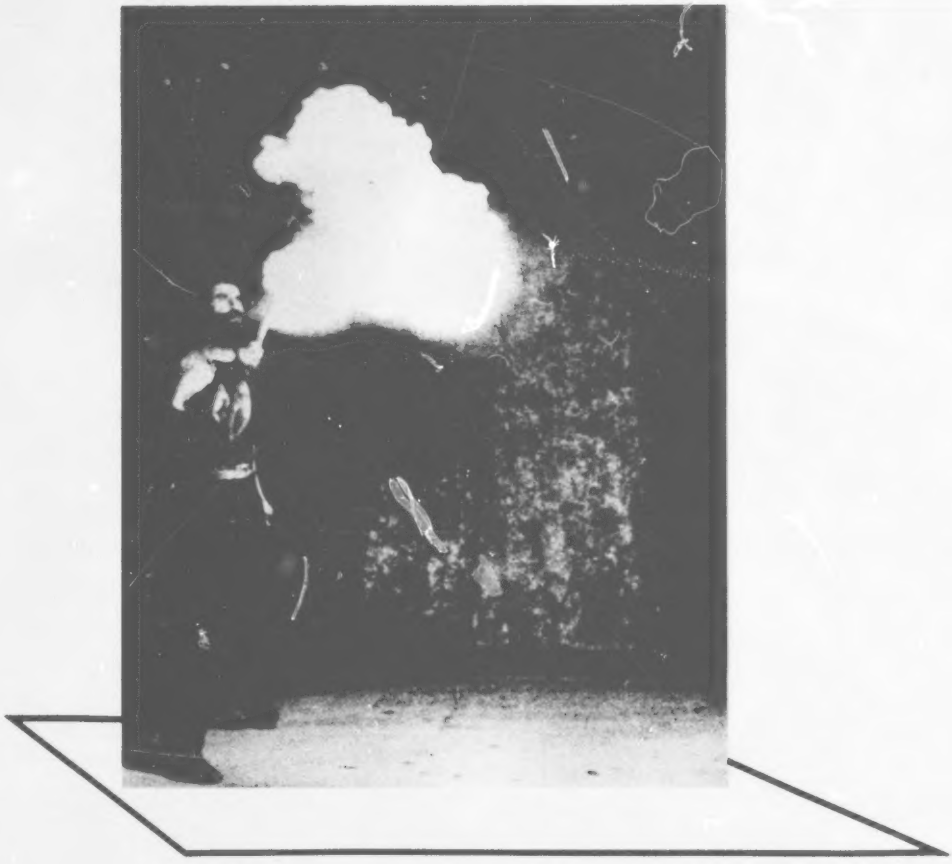
An actress enters, beating a tambourine, and recites the story of his birth: "In Montelepre in the mountains of Iblei was born a child. This child was given the name Salvatore. Turiddu-of-the-Iblei. And in Montelepre, that day was a holiday." The narrator wears a doll mask; her voice seems far away, as if an echo from the past.

The Birth of Giuliano

Salvatore's mother advances toward center stage. Her body is concealed under a huge mantle and her face is covered by a mask that recalls Picasso's African sculptures. Salvatore drags himself toward his mother, using stilts as crutches, and falls into her lap. He is speaking Sicilian dialect and it is incomprehensible. Every word is punctuated by the crash of cymbals being struck by a large robed character who represents Death. He is dressed in black and his mask is an elongated skull. He, the mother and Salvatore form a triangle; as they are whispering among themselves, the festival explodes. A Strauss waltz is heard while an actor on stilts dances and plays the violin. A fire eater advances, blowing flames, and an actress whirls around on a merry-go-round.

Giuliano's Upbringing and Rebellion

Salvatore is on stilts, trying to walk, while an actress with a Japanese mask sings: "Walk, walk, my son, walk." The rhythm of the scene becomes more and more frenzied. Salvatore does a folk-dance accompanied by tambourine and recites: "And there was hunger. There was no fire and the stars did not fall."



His mother is immobile. On one side of her is a puppeteer in black, manipulating a Sicilian puppet that represents Carlo Magno. On her other side stands an actress in white (a virgin in the religious procession) holding a tray on which is placed a loaf of bread. Salvatore tells the story of how the "Sons of the King" (the Carabinieri) arrested him when he was bringing bread to his mother. Carlo Magno sweeps the bread on the tray to the ground with his sword. "There was a moon that night, and the Sons of the King told Giuliano: 'Halt.'"

The Story of the White Queen and the Black King

A melodramatic theme of the nineteenth century is the music to which an actor sings: "And you, my sweetheart/were banished/from my life." It introduces a puppet show in which hand puppets, not Sicilian marionettes, are used. A white tent with a small blue curtain is the scene of the action. Two storytellers with accordian and violin accompany the story of the Black King (Grifone) who was murdered by the son of the White Queen (Mata). The legend is enacted on a small merry-go-round containing three skeletons, a Chinese dragon, a Moslem scimitar, the king, the queen and Death. The storyteller sings: "And three ghosts danced on the hill of the island and they drew their swords." The violin plays. "And the rain stopped and cholera and Death raged." The violin plays. "And the son of Queen Mata said, 'Your people are dying,' and he killed the King." The violin plays as the scimitar falls on Grifone. The accordian plays throughout.

The Mother is Presented with a Gift of Wheat

The scene before the preceding one is resumed. The mother is on her knees holding a tray. Actors on stilts form a circle that moves in closer and closer around the mother. They are playing tambourines. One of the actors throws handfuls of wheat on the tray.

Giuliano Tells the Story of the Scarlet Pimpernel

Seated on a stool in the middle of the stage with his eyes closed and the scimitar in his hands, Giuliano tells a story. In front of him, the image that appeared at the beginning is now stretched out as a piece of cloth, imprinted with blood. As Giuliano speaks, an actor with an accordian on his lap accompanies him, repeating: "Your people are dying." Giuliano suddenly rises and aims the scimitar toward the sky. Moving himself like a puppet, he recites a confused speech that has something to do with the Puppet Opera: "And Rinaldo . . . aims his sword . . . bloody maniac . . . look . . . Orlando is calling for help." He sits down again and thumps a stick covered with bells to the tempo of the accordian.

Intermission

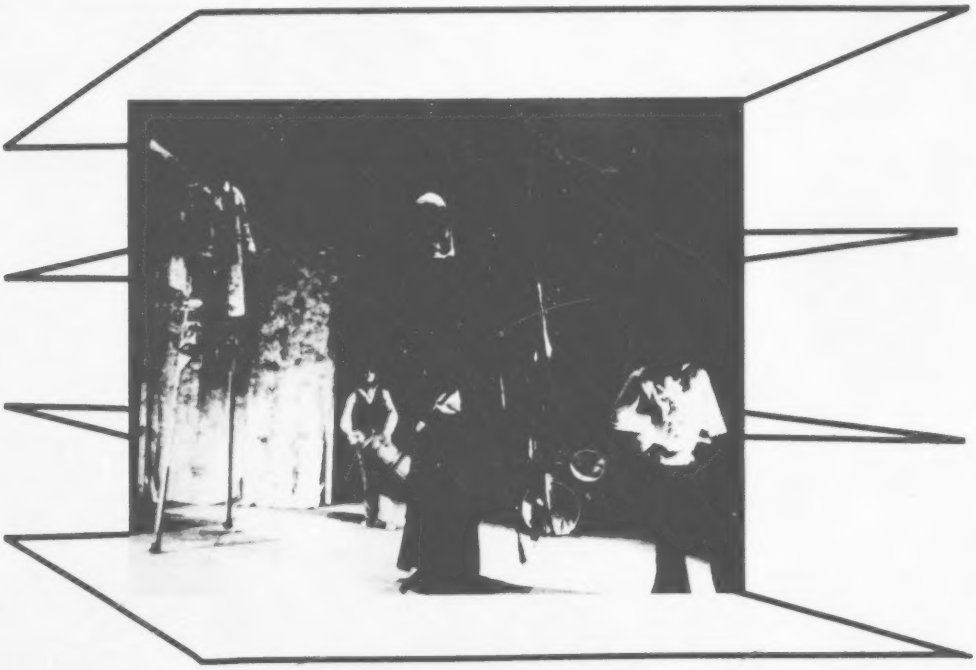
Circus music is heard as an actress pulls forward a model ship bearing an American flag. (It is a model of a ship from which Americans disembarked in Sicily during the war.) An actor wearing a frock coat and top hat announces to the audience in English: "For you directly King of Montelepre . . . when? Why? . . . When? . . . Why? . . . The Scarlet Pimpernel of modern times! SENSATIONAL!" The actress with the Japanese mask passes on stilts with a card on which is written: INTERMISSION.

Giuliano's Daughter

Salvatore enters on stilts. To the rhythm of a slow waltz, the virgin in white throws rose petals on the ground in front of him. He tells the audience a story: "You don't know, You don't know anything about the life of Turiddu Giuliano." Then he calls the girl "me figghia" (mia figlia, my daughter).

The Story of Big Lucky and Little Mike

This is the second puppet show, again introduced by a popular dance theme of the nineteenth century. Big Lucky and Little Mike are imaginary characters invented by Salvatore in his "American dream." As puppets, they carry on the theme of the preceding scene: the relationship between father and daughter, big and little.



Portella della Ginestre

The stage is completely empty. Tambourines invade the silence violently. Giuliano appears on stilts. He advances toward center stage with his finger pointed upward, as in a well-known icon of Lenin. He is accompanied by two actors on his left and Death on his right, following him a few paces behind. There is a shrill note on the trumpet and the tambourines are silenced. Death hurls a torn red flag to the ground. The tambourines begin again and Giuliano says: "Chisi si vosi e chisti vi dugnu." ("This is what you wanted and this is what I gave you.") He is accompanied by Death on the cymbals.

Variety Show at the Parca della Favorita (Palermo)

The band leader/announcer/master of ceremonies, dressed in the frock coat, hands Giuliano a red heart made of cardboard through which a knife has been pierced. Giuliano speaks: "I've heard that from seven seas and seven lands the world is made. But if you were to break it in half, you would find only the heart of my people." The announcer dances around the stage with stiff, puppet-like movements. He struts in front of the audience taking bows.

The Dance of the People and the Dance of Death

Death emerges on stilts; now his skull mask is not elongated but of normal proportions. He waves a flag that is red on one side and white on the other. He does a wild dance around Salvatore, who asks over and over again: "Where are you, Lucky and Mike? Where are you, forty-ninth star of America?"

The Americans

Giuliano and Death exit together. A procession of four actors wearing frock coats, grey masks and carrying an American flag enters slowly. One of them plays the "Lucky and Mike" theme on the trumpet. There is the aura of a grave official ceremony as the Americans recognize Sicily as the forty-ninth state. (This is another of Salvatore's dreams.)

Boogie-Woogie on Stilts

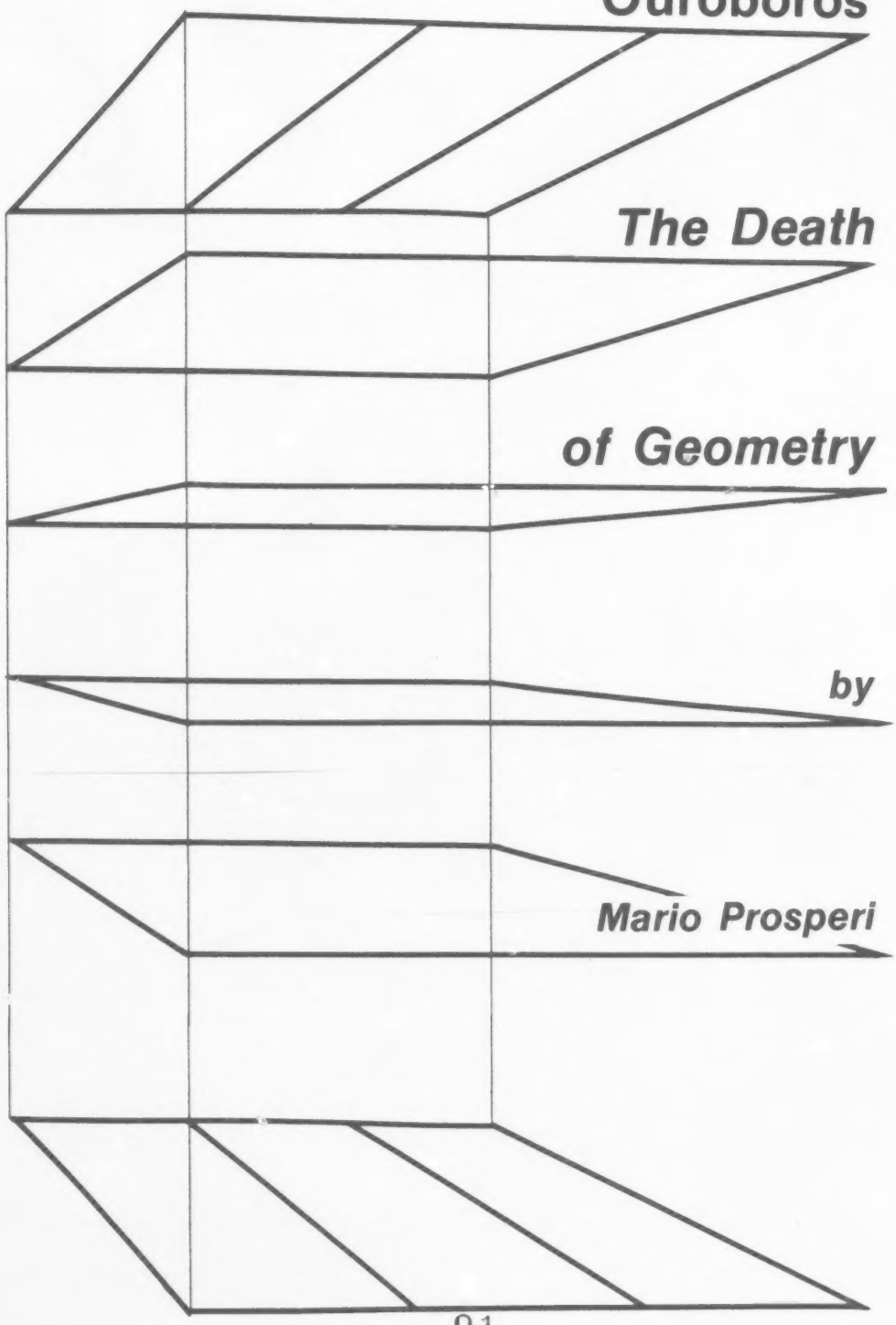
Death enters with the actress wearing the Japanese mask. They dance a boogie-woogie together, becoming more and more frenetic until the actress ends the dance by doing a split (on stilts).

Giuliano Tells the Story of Giuliano

Someone plays one of Chopin's ballades on the piano. Giuliano, without stilts, carries a toy sword and the image of the unknown man. He tells the story of how he was killed by Pisciotta: "And you/kill me/I've been waiting for you/ for a long time/I've been waiting." He thrusts the toy sword into the picture, covers it with a cloth and exits. The announcer remains on stage reciting confused fragments from the Puppet Opera. The same rural procession that marched at the beginning returns, now playing a funeral march. They pause near the empty costume with the African mask that Giuliano's mother had worn. An actress places the picture next to it.

Translated by Denise Applin

Ouroboros' The Death of Geometry

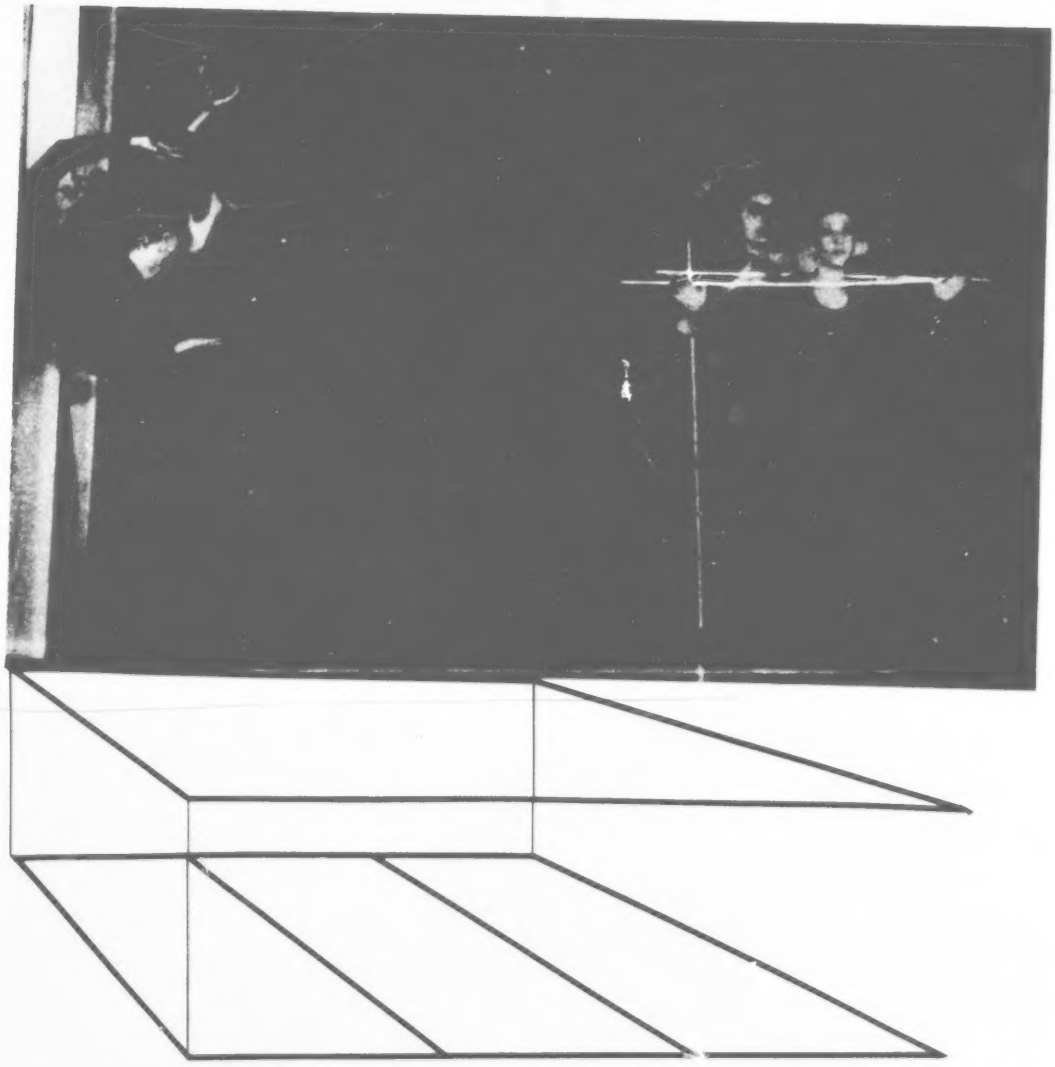


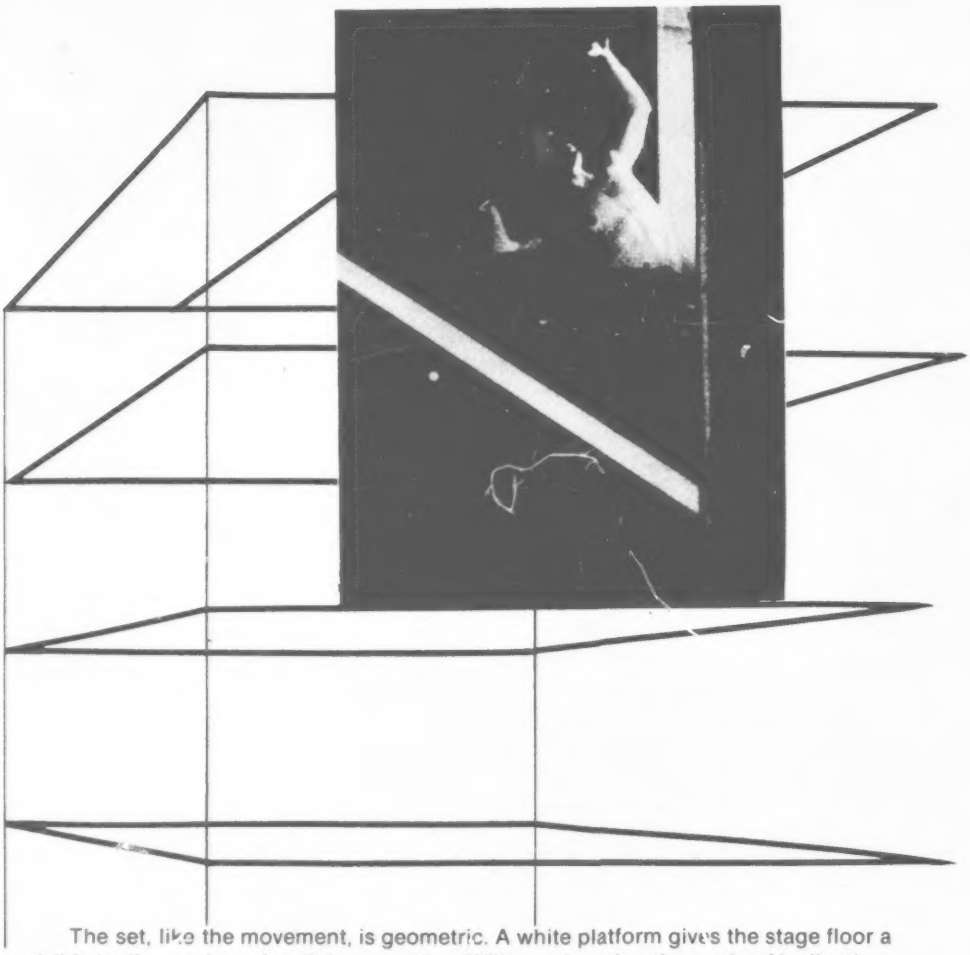
by

Mario Prosperi

The group Ouroboros takes its name from an alchemical symbol: a dragon that forms a perfect circle by holding its tail in its mouth. The symbol, according to the group, alludes to the structuralist tenet of the perfect autonomy of the signifier.

Pier Luigi Pieralli, the director of Ouroboros, created *The Death of Geometry* from a poem by Giuliano Scabia. The poem has the same relationship to the performance as it might have, for example, to a musical composition by Morton Feldman. The words are rendered "musical" by being stripped of any verbal value. Syllables are isolated, protracted and repeated; they proliferate other sounds (some of which are on tape) and the cumulative effect is rather meditative in a way that recalls Cage. Pieralli, who put the words of the poem to music himself, represents Scabia's images and meaning by the use of pantomime in which the movements are as exact as the verses.





The set, like the movement, is geometric. A white platform gives the stage floor a visible incline, as in a pictorial perspective. Without changing the angle of inclination, a gangway links the platform to the floor of the house. On the other side of the platform is a dark pit from which emerges the heads and arms of human figures as well as great flashes of light.

The platform is traversed by a wooden beam connected to the ceiling by three ropes. The ropes make it possible to raise, lower or tilt the beam to form the shape of various geometric figures. A vertical beam of the same size is placed perpendicular to the first downstage.

There are three openings in each side wall from which lights of various colors emerge. In addition to these, actors carry other lights either attached to their bodies or in their hands. The human "sources of light" provide a clearer view of the details of movement and give a hypnotic effect to the slow changing of positions.

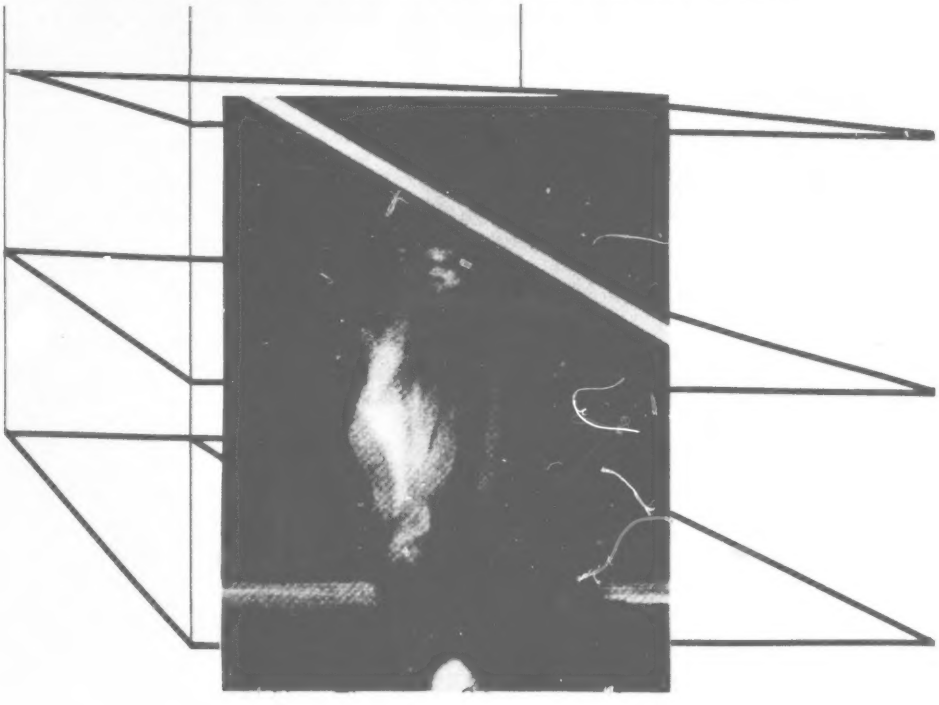
In Scabia's poem, the dominant image is a boat lost at sea without a map. It enters a cave where the dead alphabets dwell, and in the cave there is a narrow passage that leads to a magic garden (The Garden of Songs). The narrator can see the garden, but he cannot pass through the aperture.

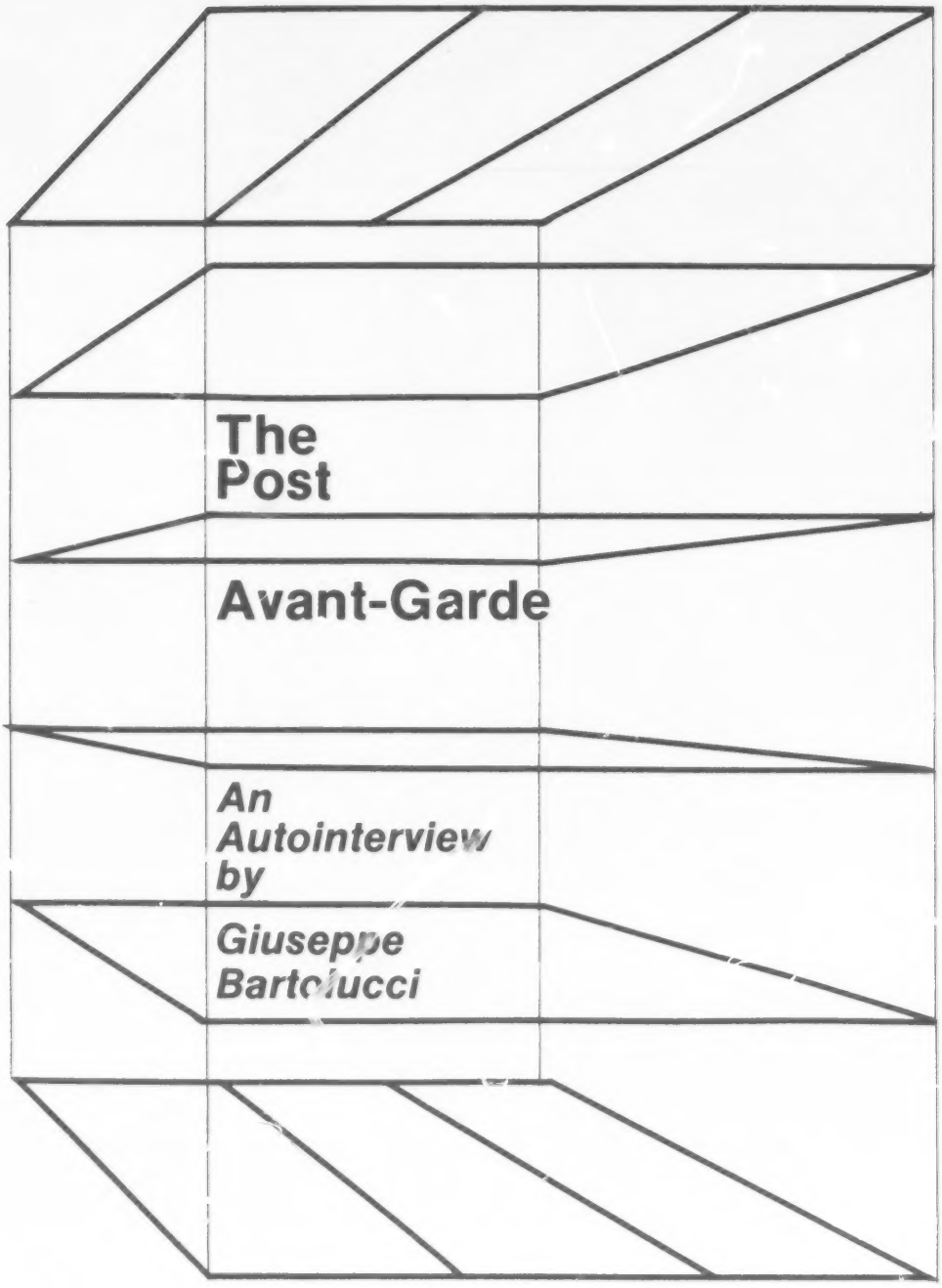
The poem's structure is that of a catechistic dialog between a voice posing questions and a voice answering them. This is rendered by the alternate movements of a woman (Gabriella Bartolomei) and a man (Pieralli) who cross the stage repeatedly in slow motion. Their movements comprise bars of body-notes, regularly iterated. They move in latitudinal and longitudinal directions, intersecting one another's trajectory according to rigorous geometric patterns. Each holds a white stick four feet long that points to the direction in which they move. The stick is also the axis of reference for the movement of the body, which is fluid and silent with a slight oscillation at the hips, as if to suggest the rocking motion of a boat.

A chorus accompanies the core relation of the protagonists with symmetrical movements and lights. They carry flames and waterfalls: the flames are created by rippling a piece of red cloth over the beam of a flashlight; the waterfalls are silver chains hanging from the actors' hands, slightly trembling under flashlights. A huge flame arises from the prompter's box. Its cloth is manipulated by Bartolomei, who gradually raises her body until the flame is as tall as she. When she lowers her body, the flame diminishes until it eventually disappears.

This kind of pulsation punctuates the entire action. There is a convergence of energy, either by the actors gravitating together or by the increase in volume of their voices; then it dissolves. The geometric patterns are intended to represent the "dead alphabets" in which human expression is trapped and stereotyped. The flashes of energy that erupt at times within the strict geometric framework represent the anxiety of freedom.

The figure of a woman illuminated in red light crawls backward on her knees, her body bent backward and her head touching the floor. The dance imitates the movements of a crab or lobster and expresses a sort of erotic frenzy. She ends the performance in a pose at the same time contracted and explosively tense.




The
Post
Avant-Garde
An
Autointerview
by
Giuseppe
Bartolucci

Q: Where is the Italian avant-garde going?

A: In one sense, it's going toward the end; riding into the sunset, as it were. But in another sense, it's going toward a new definition of itself—a refoundation.

Q: When you talk of the end, do you mean that the "theatre of images," which was typical of the Roman School, has failed?

A: On the contrary. Between the sixties and seventies, we have witnessed the conquest of a public by the avant-garde. We've seen Bene, Nanni, Perlini and Vasilicò move from the cellars to the official theatres. One might say that far from having failed, they have succeeded in removing themselves from the avant-garde. Other artists and groups have been similarly assimilated and manipulated by the institutions.

But the commercial aspect of it is less important than the fact that their way of making theatre is no longer new. The public is used to the language of the "theatre of images"; the images themselves which have been materializing now for years seem frayed at the cuffs—worn out. Their themes and techniques have been thoroughly exploited.

What we find in the Post Avant-Garde is the need for clearer ideas and a more precise expository form. The new tendency is toward deeper self-involvement and the extension of private concerns against the social backdrop. These criteria are not esthetic, but pertain more to the life styles and cultural attitudes of the new artists. They represent the redefinition and refoundation by which the essence of making theatre is undergoing a change. It's not simply a difference between generations; it's a new collective behavior that doesn't indulge the recent past. The result is an attitude that is, at the same time, existential and analytic. But the two are distinct: there's no confusion of art and life, no abuse of esthetic values.

Q: How would you define this attitude?

A: Lucidly regressive. That is, the new artists distance themselves from the institutions; episodic success and public approval are not their goals. The public expects something definite from an avant-garde performance: imagery, the encompassing use of sound, fragmentation, "poor" scenarios. And this is exactly what they don't get from the Post Avant-Garde.

Q: Where is this activity taking place?

A: At the Teatro Beat '72, where Bene, Vasilicò and Perlini started. It was chosen by the Post Avant-Garde as a kind of headquarters for encounter and experimentation after their first appearance in Cosenza in November, 1976 under the sponsorship of Franco Cordelli and myself. Now the movement has the backing of a group of poets, critics, musicians, painters and film makers: Bellezza, Grifi, Neri, Curran, Paris, Moscati, Quadri, Cordelli and myself are among them. The groups that are participating in the project are: Stran'amore and La Gaia Scienza from Rome, and Il Carrozzone from Florence. Il Teatro di Marigliano, founded by Leo De Berardinis and Perla Peragallo, is not really part of the movement, but its development is parallel to it, and its ideas are similar.

Q: You have described the Post Avant-Garde's attitude toward theatre work. Is there anything more specific that you can say about their poetics?

A: By observing their work, one can deduce certain trends. One is a form of existentialism. The young artists have a romantic need to focus on their own private experiences, though they are fully aware of the non-romantic—that is, political—significance that such experiences are given today. Leo and Perla,

in *Rusp Spers (Dispersed Toads)*, express their awareness of deviance—of a loss of balance and measure. The members of Il Carrozzone live a stubborn "confrontation" against their bodies, their models and their own work. They deny themselves the repetition of certain images if those images have been supported by public consensus.

The second trend is toward reflecting about expressive material with a destructive attitude. The artists declare not only the theatre to be anathema, but their own work, as well. *Self-Defamation* is the title of one of Stran'amore's works.

The third and perhaps most significant trend involves a particular use of the space/environment. Simone Carella, the leader of Stran'amore, works out lighting systems in connection/confrontation with the architecture of the space, rather than with the architecture of the script. In fact, the major element in his performances is lighting; there is no ideological "content," no grounds for logical continuity.

In his productions of *Self-Defamation* and *Marina* at the Beat '72, he used a circumscribed, concentric space/environment. Various elements (the chair, the lights, the sounds, the sailors) were mathematically related to one another; each one of them was isolated from the context of "meaning."

For *City Lights*, performed in Cosenza, Carella constructed a huge box transected by a "street." Pencils of light sectioned off the space to attract, convey and divide the actors/spectators who alternately crowded the street then disappeared. They collectively played the part of the city, which is indicated as the theme of the work. Because the lighting imposes a geometric, independent and nonideological framework, Carella was able to insert questions—either personal or cultural—without the risk of being trapped by their implications. These quotations are "reflections" of situations and experiences, insufficient to create a sequence, and fragmented by the lighting.

Another example is *Studies for Environment* by Il Carrozzone. These studies also focus on the architectural space, with a tendency to utilize various perspectives and to organize measurements. This procedure can be developed either as action within the given space, or as action expanded concentrically through the use of slides, opening up new spaces and offering new perspectives. The movement is based on exact spatial and temporal patterns; it can be slowed down, used simultaneously or used alternately, according to a mathematical scanning of the action. Il Carrozzone, however, is primarily concerned with existential thematics, whereas Carella is more "conceptual."

Q: *What do you mean by "conceptual"? Does a relationship exist between these groups and American conceptual art—or to the visual arts in general?*

A: Definitely. The relationship between these groups and the visual artists (especially Duchamp and the conceptualists) goes far beyond the use of pictorial images in set design and the practice of "contamination" of different media, both of which are trademarks of the Roman School. The Post Avant-Garde takes part in the process of making art and in the utopian project of changing the ways of production and the forms of communication. The analytic use of space-as-environment and space-as-architecture intends to demonstrate both the tragic lack of solidity in any existential datum subjected to such analysis, and the optimistic possibility of creating new relationships among the material elements. The fundamental attitude is a kind of wild wisdom that determines a joyful, impractical way of working toward a concrete, measurable result. The theme of the Post Avant-Garde is similar to that of the body artists: a confron-

tation between the data of existence and the means of analysis—between the mental/abstract and physical/real behavior.

Q: *Can you be more specific about the terms "existential" and "analytic"? Give an example.*

A: Il Carrozzone. *Studies for Environment*, which is basically analytical, has absorbed more and more of the group's own existential and pathological experience. The group is now concentrating on the conceptual process in order to be able to recognize each physical or mental element, excluding any possibility of "chance" from the performance, making it utterly exact. The critical consciousness is emphasized, thereby setting up a defense against instinct and spontaneity. So, the experience is a process that is submitted in turn to another process—measurement. Repetitions test it out further until the content of the experience has been thoroughly explored and the process itself has been examined in all of its aspects. The consequence is a radical materialization. Even the actors who move across this "space of measurements"—this network of concepts—are mere bodies that carry nothing, project nothing. The action is not only deprived of symbolism and imagery, but of "expressiveness," as well. Thus, a gesture is never provocative or visionary, as in the "theatre of images"; it is inserted into a spatial/mental perspective and observed in every one of its variations.

Q: *What are the implications for the actors? Doesn't this reduce their function?*

A: In a way, yes. Simone Carella refuses to recognize the actors at all. He doesn't consider them essential to his work. He accepts neither traditional actors, with their concern for psychology and verisimilitude, nor avant-garde actors, with their praxis of fragmentation and redundancy. Carella wants to demonstrate not so much that one can work without actors, but that one can "use" them for their impersonal physicality. This prohibition against "acting" is fundamental to Carella's work, which is basically abstract composition.

In *Marina*, for example, there was no script and nothing happened. Real sailors had been invited to see the performance and were involved unwittingly as actors. They were not asked to perform; their corporal presence was simply "used" by Carella. They stood in a space flooded by flashes of light and fragments of sound. Carella had no dramaturgic framework to impose upon them, but the spatial frame and the scansion of the lights gave the human objects a sort of reciprocal energy in spite of themselves.

Giorgio Barberio Corsetti of La Gaia Scienza, rather than subordinating the function of the actors, gives them an anomalous role. He wants a tension-free atmosphere so that, whatever the actor does, it has neither credibility in the traditional sense nor is it an experimental "deformity." La Gaia Scienza uses the technique of dividing the actor's gesture into small units that make up and measure the whole. Steps, words, facial expressions—each element is individually analyzed in such a way as to have no bearing on the others. In their work on Mayakovsky, each gesture was unglued from the word. In *Martian Chronicles*, the actors did little more than run after one another in a frenzy, crashing against walls and falling in heaps on the floor. But the actors performed the running and jumping with such perfect naturalness—the natu-

ralness of everyday life—that the action could not be construed as "deformed" in the sense that it referred to or made fun of something else. The more random and innocent it appeared, the more dramatic was the interpretation.

Q: *Besides their way of using actors, what else is common to the work of the Post Avant-Garde?*

A: The ultimate common denominator would have to be their minute division of time and space; that is, the ordering of duration and presentation, as if what mattered most were the analysis of what one does, rather than the fact that one does it. For this operation, the groups use a structuralist plan. Of course, very often the temper and the mind interfere with their intentions, but the actions are always built with details and every detail is an autonomous unit. The structure of these actions, therefore, is not a reflection or a projection of something else; it is the demonstration of a procedure. The work doesn't depend upon emotions or culturally mediated values. Even the groups' interest in contemporary art does not imply cultural indebtedness or the borrowing of a "style." Their work is autonomous and personal; the personality of the artist is at stake whenever private contents are assumed in the conceptual process.

The Post Avant-Garde is not the residue of a genre. It certainly owes something to Carmelo Bene's battle against interpretive acting, but it has bypassed the influence of the "theatre of images" and expressionism. The new artists want to elicit a mental "reflection" rather than a sensual perception—to release a new energy. The use of space is taken from Futurism—from Prampolini in particular—in the best Italian tradition. Another source is the Bauhaus, whose influence is visible in the preeminence of architectural planning. The use of the actor and the compartmentalization of his actions are derived from the tendency to take a distance from dramaturgic interpretation and to rely on the simultaneous presence of many diverse actions on stage, as in Happenings and post-modern dance. The use of lights can be traced to Balla or Moholy-Nagy, although it is applied to more contemporary pictorial and behavioral issues. The use of the image is determined by an interdisciplinary network of elements—be they objects or persons—that exists outside of an esthetic context. The source for this is Duchamp and his capacity for surprise and deception. The use of slow motion and repetition can be ascribed to new trends in non-narrative, non-psychological literature.

The result is a process that disintegrates the narrative tension and subjects it to the reflection of the mind. The absence of a dramaturgic source is compensated by the autonomous development of stage composition, working from quotations and fragments. Regression, which is the prime condition for refounding a theatre from primordial elements, and deviance, which produces the material for analysis, both point toward anarchy and isolation, which are typical of the new generation. Objective conflicts and individual contradictions do not coincide even though they have their roots in common. And the expression of such an imbalance needs cruel lucidity at the cognitive level and tragic radicalization at the existential, with full awareness of the political implications of the "private."

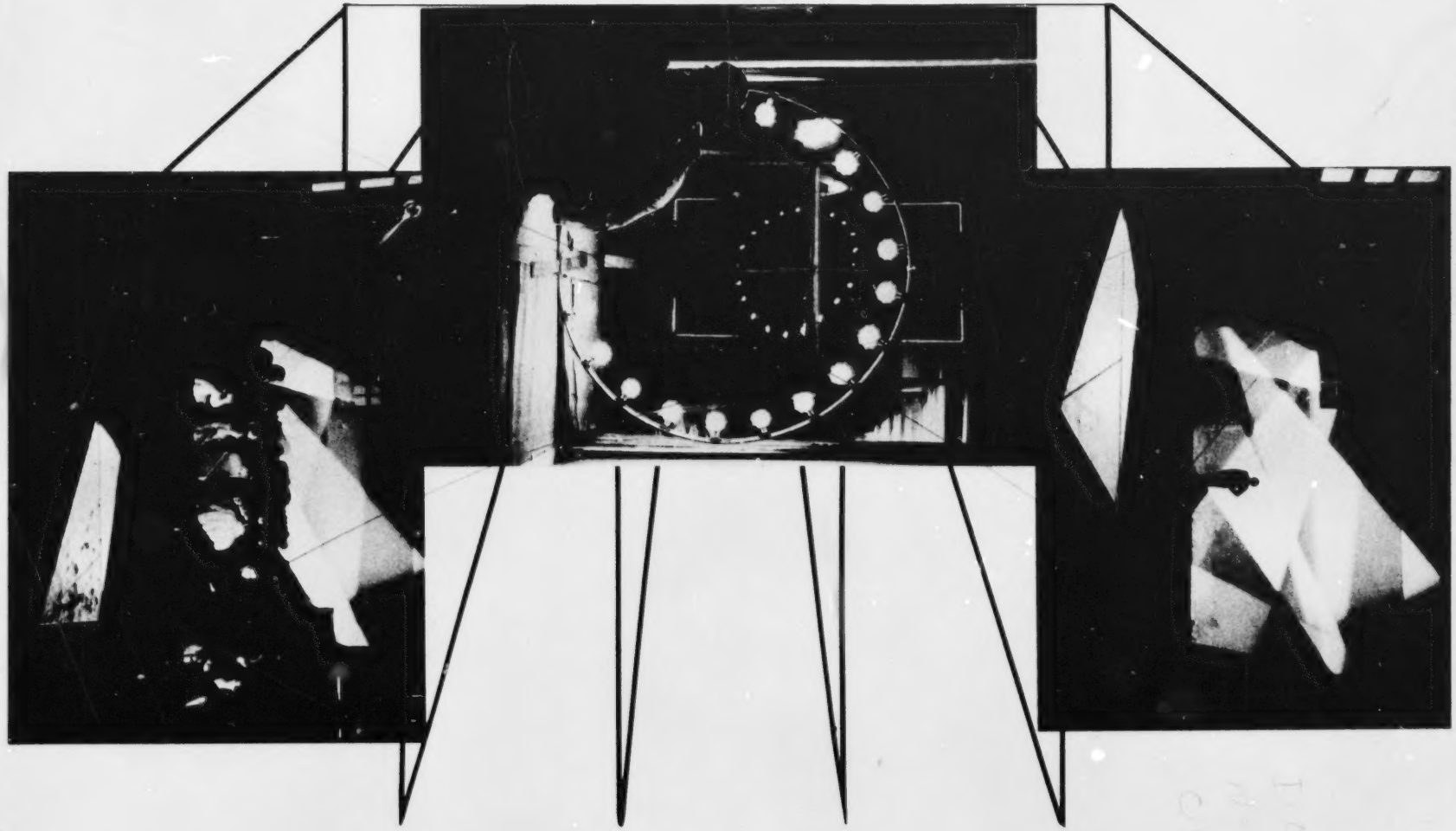
City Lights,
a Performance by Stran'amore

The gymnasium measured 24 x 18 meters. The space was articulated primarily through the use of light. All other elements were reduced to two dimensions, so that the space appeared empty even though there was a "street" represented by a narrow strip of asphalt that entered from the open door and transversed the entire gymnasium. An obstacle on the side of the street was represented by a circle of 60-watt light bulbs attached to a metal base. Another obstacle was a sheet of plexiglass on which was projected a slide showing a window. To the right of the entrance were eighteen red velvet theatre seats with large plates of glass leaning on them to prevent anyone from sitting down. On the floor, perpendicular to the street, were six strips of wood that copied the line of vertical beams that supported the ceiling. Thus the floor appeared to be the ceiling and vice versa. A beam was projected from the middle of the right wall and screened in such a way as to form a rectangle of light on the floor. The rectangle was enclosed, as an oblique pyramid of light, by nylon ropes suspended from the source of light to the boundaries of the rectangle.

To the left of the entrance, a large sheet was stretched tautly to obscure partially a tub full of water. In front of the sheet was a table with seven spotlights on it; the spotlights cut the entire space down to the height of an average man. On the opposite wall, near the theatre seats, a gigantic square of light, that resembled Prampolinian scenography was projected. To the left, in the middle of the wall, were two rectangles: one white and the other pink. On the white one was a lamp; on the pink one was an empty bird cage.

From the description of these elements, one can gather that real objects did not occupy the space; the only invasion was that of the public—an "acting" public. For example, the ribbon of asphalt that suggested the continuity between "inside" and "outside" became a *present* element when people walked on it. The beams of light cut through the entire length of the empty space; but when the public was present, the beams splintered, illuminating everything they came in contact with. They provided a partial image to the spectator, an image that was multifaceted and sweeping. The same can be said for the strips of wood that continued the structure of the gymnasium. They, however, were more effective in preventing the spectators from moving freely.

The emptiness of the space was emphasized by the dust in the air, viewed either against the light or toward the beam enclosed by the nylon ropes. The sound was kept at a high volume throughout the performance; there were excerpts from Lohengrin, the recording of a game of pelota, an automobile race course, and the live sounds of the public, which were recorded and played back, thereby forcing the spectators to raise their voices to be heard over their voices on tape. This induced total confusion. The most significant effect was an absence of the restraint one would expect to find in the theatre. The public had to stand up during the entire performance, moving around the space, forming groups and disbanding spontaneously. The actors each discovered their own itineraries, which had to intersect, either deliberately or not, the itineraries of the other actors and of the spectators.



La Gaia Scienza (Roma)

Introduction to the performance of La Gaia Scienza

We chose this title because we like it. What is proposed here is only a moment of our research. We have analyzed the ways in which, among an infinite number of possibilities, the elements that constitute the language of the theatre may combine: space, time, rhythm, light, sound, objects and the "actor." The latter, however, is continually attempting to work with language. We cannot help but glance at the uninterrupted flux of reality and notice the bustle of a thousand details all linked in a truly surprising manner to the universal situation. Our gratitude to Nietzche, to Laforgue and others who gave us permission to quote.

As for the rest, the text of our work does not depend as much on words as on concrete stimuli (objects, documents, photographs, slides, verbal material) that each "actor" grasps in its everyday "existing." We then work on this material improvising with concrete actions, asking ourselves what could "being" mean on stage. We also tend to denounce the general repressive mechanisms evident in even the smallest events. These elements are found intertwined in the fabric of the city, with all those minute explosions that render it an ever-moving situation, perennially inclined to negate itself. At the same time, the contradictions are accentuated. In that case, something must happen. The characters which from time to time the actors represent and define aim at grasping these contradictions, asking themselves if it is possible for a "story" or a "positive hero" to exist.

Translated by Peter Carravetta

Il Carrozzone's *Presages of the Vampire:*

Studies for an Environment

Presagidel Vampiro (Presages of the Vampire) is not a performance. It is the refusal of performance. Presages: something extremely definite in itself—the single presentiment—but inarticulated, or better articulated according to a procedure not of "necessity" but of demonstration. Articulated *a posteriori.*

Presages of the Vampire is a selection from studies on the theme of the rapport inside-outside. The outside in the inside and the inside in the outside: the Duchampian door.

Presages of the Vampire leads to a reflection-decomposition of the theatre in the theatre, of time in the theatre, of space in the theatrical space, Vampire. One can have presentiments of war, presentiments of a storm, presentiments of being attacked, presentiments of death.

They are presentiments of the vampire because they are the mise-en-scène of a crisis, one of our crises, the crisis we went through during the aborted preparation of a never-completed performance on the theme of the vampire.

What remains is a tendency toward the "diabolic" that develops in the use of "cognitive" elements (perspective, proportion) seen through a "mad" eye and destined to lead to a perdition, to a "deception": the perdition and the deception of the painter who, lost in the dream of a perfection "other" than that of his painting, lost in a dream of alchemic perfection, dies. Parmigianino or Paolo Uccello. . . .

Presages of the Vampire is not the representation of an ideology but the consumption, in the first person, of a passion.

Presages of the Vampire is not a performance: it is a series of interchangeable *studies for an environment* (studies in the French sense of "*études*"), subject to interpolations, to open spatio-temporal variations. In other words, the sequence of the "studies" is not forced *a priori* but is determined by (1) the physical space (2) the presence or absence of one or more actors (3) the socio-cultural situation (4) the personal existential rapport established with the city, the "place" and the "location" (Castaneda).

The common denominator of the "studies" is the "study" by the "bodies" (in the sense of physics) of the theatrical language: space, time, the human body, light, sound, the psycho-physical unity of the actor.

The particular interest lies in establishing analytically a relationship between space and time, that is, to explore in what way space is a function of time (S=F(T)).

Other loci of research are the relations between what is real-represented-symbolic within a given real, represented, and symbolic space (or time). The analytical research, starting from "degree zero" of the theatrical language (*scrittura scenica*), extends to the attempt at defining the primary elements of a structure, of a figure, in which one notices the binomial elements: vertical-horizontal, high-low, increase-decrease, immersion-surfacing, presence-absence, existence-representation, mobility-immobility, object-subject, sound-silence.

The objectifying and the definition of these figures is entrusted mainly to physical measurement (for example, in study No. 10 there is a rope that measures the variable distance between the bodies of the two actors; in other studies it is the light, etc.)

At the base of this there is a desire to "disintegrate" any preestablished, and therefore authoritarian, language: the proposition of a linguistic "moment" in "fermentation," open to any possible and unpredictable development.

Question: Burning like a Buddhist Monk or like a partisan?
Answer (after a long pause): Like a partisan . . .
(From an interview with Giuliano Scabia)

Sons of poisoned fathers. To reflect on theatre so as to reflect on our double lives: as turtles, as eskimos. On the means of making theatre: atomizing them, analyzing them. Or capturing in the two-way street between the factories and the bits of house the only act still "sensible": the assassination of one's own body.

This is the reason you will only have sentiments, no emotions: from pathological asthenia to direct poisoning. We are sons of no one; we are devious and desperate. Disguised and small, so small, without any emotions.

To poison oneself, to cut oneself, to be shot, to vomit for its own sake. Hoping it lasts. In a real time; in a symbolic time. Between the true and the represented, between the real and unreal, between blood and wine. There is disgrace in murder, there is hysterical hunger. I'll ravage, I'll kill, I'll drink your blood. The problem, then, is this: given an invariable constant—light—how do we bring luminous variations by adding B or C (variations on the constant) to A (light)? A full, winter light? The problem is to treat light with light as if it were darkness and viceversa (we'll show empty hands; we are not conjurers). And capture the moment—that moment of variation (a mental dizziness) between darkness and light, light and light: that moment that is, in sound, "click" of the switch and visibly is neither dark nor light but is in the middle of darkness and light, of light and light.

To isolate that moment: when it's no longer dark but it's not yet light (a mental vertigo).

Next problem is this: how does one move a body from A to B? What happens between A and B? What is the transitional moment in the middle: When the body is no longer in A and not yet in B? That moment that divides the moment in symmetrical or asymmetrical parts and should be fixed like a photograph so it can be studied in sections. And to know how one goes from A to B and from B to C and how one passes from A to C? The problem is also this: to know, to understand space, isn't that right? Insofar as length and width; its thermic, hygrometric and climatic nature; its masses, weights or, out in the open, "the location" (speaking as Castaneda); to discover means to acknowledge the double aspect of space, its reflection and the distance between two points, the Cartesian coordinates of the body that moves in space; the perspective as a symbolic, evil form—cancelled by mental substitution. And then the problem is this: between real time and represented (symbolic) time, what is the moment of transition (the "duplicate" in space) when TR is no longer itself and TS has not yet announced itself? And how does one break up time in systematic atoms, in atomical particles?

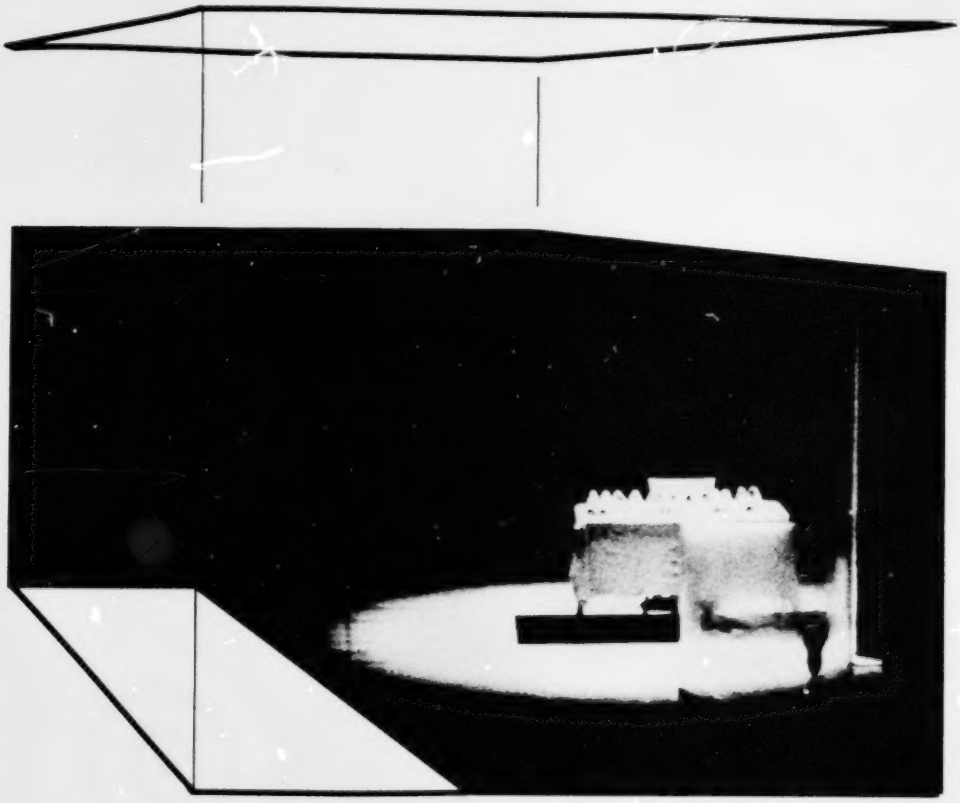
Or one's own body: its abilities, its movements, its own sound? And above all: the muscles, the chemical combinations that permit locomotion, the blood and the sugars converted into motor strength. How to love it more, how to amplify it; it is the only thing left. And it begs for love. Like all violence, it is a request for love. This is a "materialistic" theatre, this conceptual and sentimental reflection on theatre, this study that leads *to the limits;* and after the study is over, will we continue to "produce performances"? Or will we produce absolute nothingness?

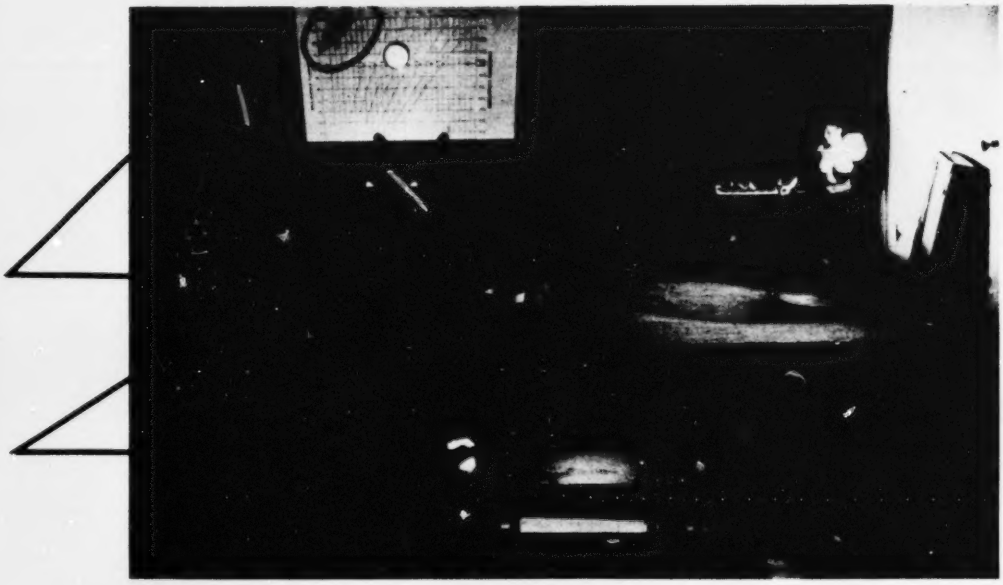
(A vertiginous silence of the mind—a conceptual dizziness—a dizziness in the unfulfilling passage from ideation to realization/representation. The only possibility is to propose ideation—conceptually. But we will never do it because we live within our bodies.)

Before old age and when the war is over I shall have filled with sperm the small planks of the small bridges in the woods. I shall leave for the pole on an expedition. How many dogs are you taking with you? And sweet wine for festive nights. In the lands of ice, I shall scatter the murdered ones through the world on small ships of reed. Because:

Nobody trusts hope to his youthfulness
it is only vagueness.

Translated by Peter Carravetta





Study for Environment 4 (Presages of the Vampire),

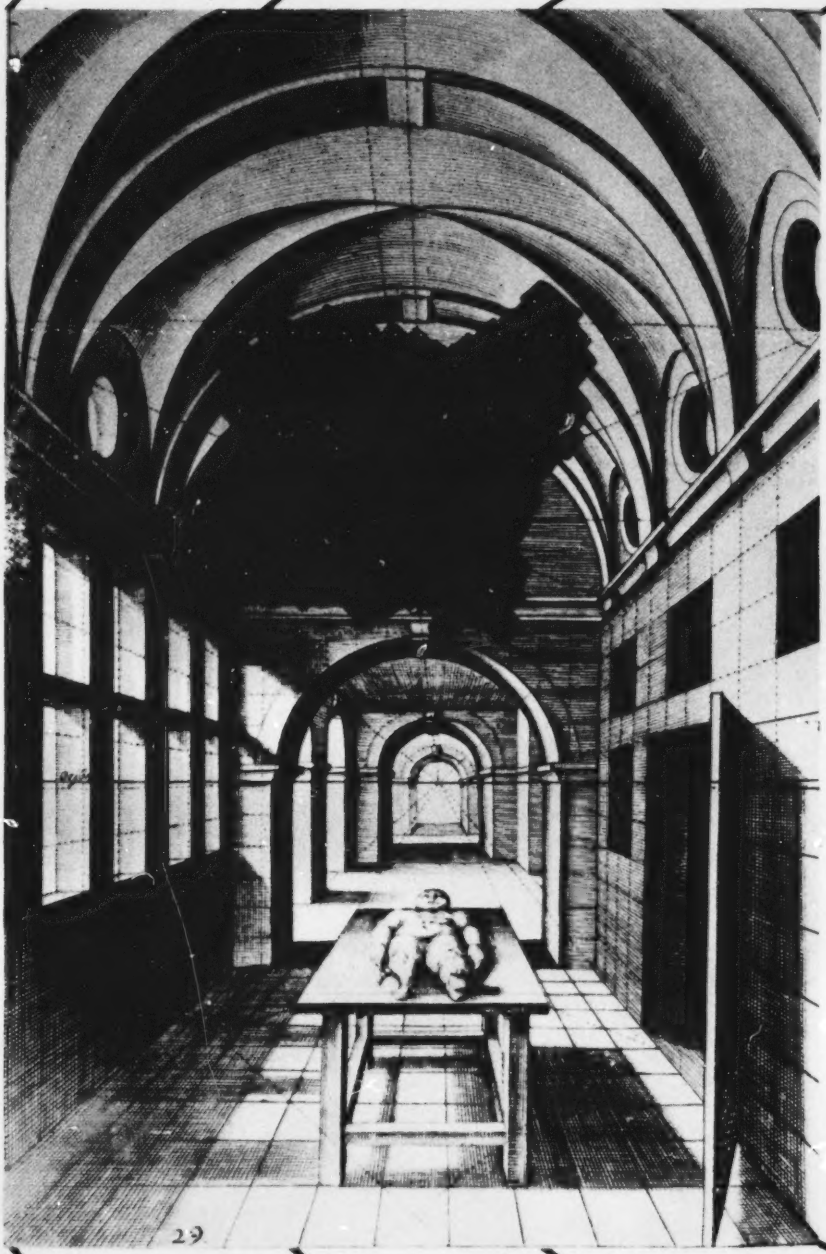
a Performance by Il Carrozzone

The minimal elements are:

1. *A table on which are placed six pairs of women's shoes. The table is illuminated from above by a cone-shaped light.*
2. *A boy dressed in white, stretched out on a mattress-less bed extended from the back wall. He is illuminated by the reflection of a slide projected on the back wall.*
3. *A nude woman standing very close to the audience with a lamp in one hand. She is behind a semicircular sheet of transparent plastic that comes to her waist.*
4. *A soundtrack composed of screams, operatic extracts, chimes, a conversation in German, and a 14th-century madrigal.*

Most of these elements are stationary. The shoes on the table are invariable except for the change in the intensity of the light that can either accentuate or mitigate their presence. The boy on the bed is also immobile. The nude woman makes a brief, infinitesimal movement, turning her head to the right every time the lamp in her hand is lit, then returning it to its original position when the lamp is turned off. The lamp stays lit for a longer period each time, so that her movement becomes increasingly longer to correspond to it.

The most mobile element is the slide projected over the boy's head. It is varied in two ways: one is the changing of the slide itself (there are several, each of which is alternated with a blank); the other is the positioning of each slide, which can be either *vertical* (either above the boy on the ceiling, so that the light hits him from above, or on the floor in front of him, so that the light rises from below) or *horizontal*, simply projected on the back wall. The slide that remains longest is the image of a man stretched out on a cot in the same position as the boy. (It is a design of a perspective by Vredemann de Vries.)



Design of a Perspective by Vredemann de Vries used by Il Carrozzone:

"The spot of ink is a sign of a destructive impulse against geometry."

Il Carrozzone's script for the performance:

Two women dressed in red (Luisa-A, Teresa-B).

Two spaces; one the reverse side of the other.

A cone of light on the table.

A line of women's shoes with spike heels, five black pairs and one white pair: BBBBWB.

The light varies from maximum intensity to minimum intensity down to total darkness, which marks the separations or pauses. Behind the table, a chair.

There is always a faint light that permits a glimpse of the changing movements and the movements performed in the dark. The music is a 14th-century madrigal recorded on two identical tapes. One tape begins, and then the other is added 40 seconds later. They are of the same length, so that the second tape finishes 40 seconds after the first.

I. A approaches the chair. She pulls it out from the table. She stops with her right hand on the back of the chair. Lights up full.

II. A sits down. Blackout.

III. Lights up full. B enters from the right carrying a window (Duchamp). Her trajectory is a straight line toward the table. She holds the window diagonally. B is seen in profile.

IV. B stops at the right side of the table. The lights go to minimum intensity.

V. B, turning at a 135° angle, places the window on the edge of the table. She stands to the left of the window. She turns her head toward the audience.

VI. Lights up full. A is immobile. A rises from the chair. She approaches the window, and rubs the glass with her right hand. She leaves her hand on the glass. She moves her face toward the glass, and looks out from it. Her left hand is resting on the table. (The action has the rhythm of regular breathing. It does not slacken.)

VII. A yellow slide is frontally projected from outside the scene. The slide shows a classification of birds. It moves from right to left and back again, crossing the window on its course. The light is intense and yellow; A's shadow is on the wall.

VIII. A sits down again. She is immobile in front of the window. Lights go to dim.

IX. A places her head on her right arm, which is folded on the table. Blackout.

X. A is leaning on her right arm. Her right arm is on the table. Lights up full. Her left arm glides along the table. The lights dim somewhat.

XI. B places the window in front of her. The top edge of the window makes the cone of light rock back and forth. The lights dim a little more.

The shoes are turned around (now the heels are toward the audience). Lights dim further. A rises from her chair and goes to the right corner of the table. B goes to the left corner. The lights dim still further, and then there is a blackout.

Lights up full. The entire action is repeated in reverse. This time, the spectators' point of view is from inside (the window). There is a variation at X: the right arm falling conceals the movement. Blackout.

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